SEVEN DAYS OF OUR LIFE

ANDREI GOULYASHKI

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ANDREI GOULYASHKI

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
SOFIA * 1966

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Part I

THE PORTRAIT

CHAPTER ONE

1

Two years ago, the Ethnographic Institute at the Academy of Sciences decided to organize a big exhibition of Rhodope folk rugs.

'Well,' the director said to me, 'here is an opportunity for you to visit your favourite village of Kesten. There you'll surely find just the sort of tufted rugs we're looking for. Would you like to slip over there for a day or two?'

'You bet I would,' I agreed. And without any hesitation I added enthusiastically:

'Certainly I'll go! And I'll bring you back a wonderful exhibit, for I've got the rugs of Kesten village at the tips of my five fingers!'

That is what I said then. And that is how it all got started.

I felt like slipping away from the city for a spell, just for two or three days, but it was late autumn and the snow would not be late in coming, so I had to have some serious excuse for getting away to the country.

Of course, you do not know the village of Kesten but I am quite familiar with it. The little village is tucked away from the world among the pine forests and impassable wastelands of the Trigrad Mountains. The soft 'yo' instead of the 'o' sound has been kept in the vernacular of the inhabitants, mostly wood-cutters and shepherds, and when the sound issues from the lips of the young slim-legged women and girls of the region, it caresses your ear like the gentle Aegean breeze that blows from the south in the evenings. The couches in the windows of the rooms of the small stone houses in the village are covered with home-made rugs that always look new and gay, broad-striped in scarlet and blue and yellow. The scarlet of these rugs is coppery, like the sunset above the dark pine forests on the ridges and slopes; their blue, unfathomable and transparent, reminds you of the morning sky, as clear as a freshly washed window pane; and their yellow is a shining golden hue, the colour of ripe quinces, of sweet southern grapes and of the rich Thracian tobacco. That is why the rugs covering the window couches in the low stone houses always look fresh and cheerful.

But you will be greatly mistaken if you think that these rugs are the only thing which the housewives of Kesten village can be proud of. They have also the tufted rugs that they use as blankets — wonderful bed-covers that you will find nowhere else in the world. They do not smile, because the white hands of the young women have not woven their secret dreams into them. They are stern and austere, these tufted rugs, reminding you of hard-hearted and imperious men and of their strong sinews; they also make you think of packs of wolves and snowstorms, of mists creeping like fleecy wool harls from peak to peak; and of that sweet warmth in cold, stormy nights that takes away the young women's breath and makes their lips burn like fire. It is such rugs that the housewives in Kesten village have, the like of which you cannot find anywhere else in the world.

But if you think that the good things in Kesten end with them, you will be mistaken again. For several years now Kesten village has had its co-operative farm and large sheepfolds, with their straw-covered floors, and a new radio set in the farm office and several dozens of books on the shelves in the young people's whitewashed club. True, the young people do not remain long in Kesten — they go to the mines to dig ore, but the books stay on the shelves, a joy to the eye.

There are other good things, too, in Kesten village, as for instance, Nourié's almond eyes, big and dewy like the eyes of most of her high-thighed friends; there are sheep, regular beauties, with black spots and curly fleeces, that give several earthen bowls of milk a day; and there are a great many more wonderful things in this village, but of all of them, of course, the apiary ranks first.

The wonderful apiary of Kesten village! It is well worth while making that long and tedious journey, just for the sake of the apiary. It is not difficult at all to find your way to it in that barren country. You go out of Trigrad and take the road leading to the Daoudovi Sheepfolds. It is a dirt road, here and there overgrown with grass, uneven in places and humpy, but everywhere green and gay. It winds its way between ferns and bushes, coming out in some places through sun-flooded glades where, in early summer time, you can pick wild strawberries to your heart's content — strawberries as red as rubies, succulent and wonderful like the lips of Nourié, Grandfather Rakip's granddaughter. You are sure to pick those strawberries, for they will beckon to you and temptingly offer themselves, unlike the lips of Nourié. Then you will go on along the road, till you come to a turn and enter a quiet, dark forest, a forest of age-old spruces and gigantic pines, covered with a thick carpet of decayed pine-needles and rarely penetrated by the rays of the sun. It is so silent and quiet here that if you stop for a moment you will hear your own heartbeats and your own breathing. It is so quiet that your imagination will run wild and the thick-trunked spruces and gigantic pines will look to you like apparitions from a deep and sinister dream. But of course, you will not stop but will go on avoiding all unpleasant thoughts. Unpleasant thoughts are irksome guests, the more so when the sky is hidden away above your head by branches that look like outstretched green arms and you are moving on in a greenish dusk, as in some submarine world.

Wolves prowl here in winter, cutting across the forest in crossing from one border region to another, and occasionally giving chase to some less cautious deer on the way. In summer the wolves go down to the Daoudovi Sheepfolds to be nearer the summer pastures, to the fenced-in pens and sheds. So in crossing the forest, just whistle to yourself, quite free of care and disagreeable thoughts. And if you catch sight of a heavy, shaggy, brown shape, threading its way like a ghost among the hollow old tree stumps, do not be afraid, for you will either be imagining it, or, if it is real, you can be sure that this shaggy queen of the forest is only gathering luscious little rootlets or looking for hollows filled with sweet wild bee's honey and will take no interest at all in you. Walk on undisturbed, and good luck to you, and be thankful to chance for giving you the possibility of seeing one of the last representatives of the wild mountain world.

Thus, at last, you will emerge from the dusk of this very old forest. You will take leave of its silence, its shadows and its slumberous green quietude. A sunny smiling slope will then meet your eye, spacious and bright, sinking away slightly to the east. The grass will be knee-deep, with patches of camomile here and there, and blackberry und raspberry bushes twining and twisting together. And where the slope ends, there at the bottom, there is a spruce copse, fresh and gay. Beyond it in the valley, overgrown with hazelnut-trees, a limpid stream leaps from stone to stone. In the shady, sunless spots it forms little shallow pools, bluish and transparent, the water of which seldom reaches above Nourié's pale knees. The water is icy cold, and when Nourié comes out on the mossy pebbled bank, her skin is rosy, as if besprinkled with ruby beads.

Here, between this spruce copse and the stream, is Grandfather Rakip's apiary. The apiary, of course, belongs to the co-operative farm, but who knows why all call it Grandfather Rakip's apiary. This makes no difference anyway, because Grandfather Rakip and the farm are two inseparable things.

Well, the question was about the apiary. To have come to Kesten village and not to have dropped in here would be the same as being in Paris, for instance, and not seeing the Eiffel Tower. And it is not because of the

hives that you have to drop in — there are hives of all kinds here, both osier wickerwork ones and modern ones of deal. To cast a glance at the iron framework of the Eiffel Tower from below without climbing up to one of its landings, would not be such a terrible loss after all. But to fail to taste a little bowl of honey from Grandfather Rakip's apiary would be something you would rightly regret all your life.

Do you know what lovely honey it is? How can you know, when Kesten village is miles and miles away, hidden from the world amid impassable forests! And the honey is wonderful — there can be no doubt about its delicious taste. It has the sweet flavour of spruce and blossoming fir, the fragrance of a bridal bouquet of wild flowers, of mountain glades studded with crane's bill and blackberries. Such is the honey which Grandfather Rakip gets from his apiary hidden away behind the spruce copse! Go and pay your respects to the old man, and visit him, if it is only for an hour or so. You will hardly have the luck to meet his granddaughter Nourié, for she will surely be running about with the flock of goats, warding them off the plum trees. Occasionally she bathes in those cool, limpid pools in the valley, but there you are even less likely to catch sight of her, because there is a dense growth of hazelnut trees and other bushes all over the valley, and she has the sensitive ear of a deer. But Grandfather Rakip is a kind and hospitable host who will not fail to treat you to a bowl of honey. And you may be sure that his honey is just as wonderful now as it was when Orpheus roamed these places....

Yes, it is worth one's while to make this long, tedious journey and see the village of Kesten, a tiny spot built of stone and older than the oldest pines in the region, tucked away in the wastelands, beautifully wild and gazing out at the new life with the same wondering, dark, dewy eyes as Nourié.

I filled two cans with gasoline, got some food into my canvass travel bag and mounted my jaded Rossinante, that is, climbed into the seat behind the wheel of my aged and dilapidated Willis, and set out boldly on my journey, unheedful of the meteorological weather forecast. It predicted snow, but I tried not to give too much credit to it. Well, I thought, how many times it had forecast sun and heat, and on the day in question there would be sudden, stormy showers. Now snow had been predicted, but who could tell? I should not have been surprised in the least if I had been churning up an uninterrupted trail of whirling grey dust in the wake of my jade along the whole journey. And from the cloudless skies a cold sun might go on smiling down at me, colder even than Nourié's coldest smile. But, a smile is a smile, after all.

No, I refused to believe, was reluctant to believe the foreboding weather forecast. And that is why I filled the two spare cans with gasoline, shoved a loaf of bread, a big chunk of freshly salted bacon, sugar and a box of the finest coffee into my travel bag, and confidently spurring on my skinny jade, set out on my journey.

My old car had at least two decades behind it, for it had first seen the light of day just when the Second World War was ending. Precociously grown to maturity in hardship, thrown somewhat out of gear with adventure, worn out with a disorderly life, this Willis happened to be on Bulgarian soil after the Armistice and, enlisted for special service, rolled for several years along the neglected roads of the south. It did pretty strenuous work at that time, full of heroic romance, that was accompanied by broken springs and axles, melted ball bearings and worn out cams and segments. The clutch got loose, it began to breathe heavily in climbing the higher hills, it required additional rations of oil to cool its overheated entrails. Then it was transferred to the 'rear' where, in the company of other veterans, it did its bit in the supply network, delivering vegetable oil and flour to the kitchens of holiday houses, and also musk and water melons in the summer time. Then it was scrapped, sold to the 'Secondary Raw Materials Service' where the local people ravaged it so mercilessly that it looked like a truly miserable Lazarus: barefooted, baldheaded, blind, without its storage battery, with a missing dynamo, with a yawning cavity where an electric motor had once throbbed.

This former western dandy now looked like a bedraggled and downtrodden rambler. Miserable as it was, it would hardly have been able to arouse any compassion in its homeland — some open-hearth furnace would have swallowed it like a morsel of fresh, warm bread. But in the Slav world romanticism is still a characteristic feature of many a heart. A Dobroudja agriculturist, the chairman of a co-operative farm, cast covetous eyes at the wreck, for he found it was going for a song and his own future would be much brighter if he had a real jeep. The dream was irresistible. Thus, after prolonged repairs, the Willis started rolling once again, now across the black soil of Dobroudja. The chairman's heart rejoiced, but his purse was empty: the endless repairs consumed the whole of his salary for a year in advance. His future ceased to look rosy; although the jeep was a bright spot in it, dark forebodings, one worse than the other, began to poison his life by day and by night. Such romance does sometimes get you fed up.

And when you get truly fed up you are apt to do desperate things. What the chairman did in his despair was to sell his jeep to me. At that time I was painting pictures in Dobroudja, getting ready for my first exhibition, and I was convinced that just this jeep would help me to carry it off with great success. That is what the chairman also insisted — that it would indeed be of great use to me. A jeep was not like other cars: it ran uphill and down, on dry or muddy roads, equally good on any, bad weather making no difference at all, as it paid no attention to weather. For an artist these were all major advantages. For how could he get to know the people and the lives of the people if he were not ceaselessly shuttling back and forth along all sorts of roads and at any time of the day? Only a jeep with its double gear can be of any use to him in the pursuit of such a goal. The chairman was an agriculturist, an educated man, well-aware of the daily needs of an artist like me. And thus, he sold me his Willis at quite a low price and I thanked him from the depth of my heart.

Several years had passed since then, and with every year I became more deeply convinced that my Willis was a worthless nag and that it would keep my pockets empty, because it fell ill all too often and for long spells, and the mechanics even now demand high, even exorbitant prices for their wonder-working services. But I neither curse nor hate my jeep, and have kept a warm feeling in my heart for that Dobroudja chairman. For how could I have seen, for instance, the village of Kesten if I had not had my jade of a vehicle? Its mere existence makes me think of long hard journeys, and Kesten village, as you know, lies somewhere at the end of the world. True, I have had many misadventures with my Willis, but I do not mind. I have seen gigantic construction projects that filled my heart with pride; I have met interesting people, mettlesome people, who with all their heart were building picturesque cascades and wonderful palatial factories with their own hands, and I portrayed these men on my canvases. How then could I hate my poor old jade! In fact, I was awfully fond of it.

My misadventures — a single bowl of Grandfather Rakip's honey made up for them! My worries? I quite forgot them, and it was very easy to put them out of my mind. I would just close my eyes, and in a maze of warm colours I could see a spruce copse, sunny and fresh, and beyond it, a valley with a dense overgrowth of hornbeam and hazelnut trees. And in this valley there ran a stream tumbling over smooth, white stones, a stream forming blue, transparent pools in its deeper spots.... But what lovely things you see, when you close your eyes!

So I climbed into my jaded jeep, and set out on my journey.

2

I got to the top of the Vakarel Hills and when I saw the horizon — dull, shrouded in great heaps of clouds that formed a wall behind which all the dark forces of the world seemed to have gathered, as soon as I caught sight of this grey horizon, I remembered the weather forecast. Snow had surely begun to fall behind that wall of cloud.

I had set out for Kesten village in the best of moods: I was glad that I should again meet those people whom I had got to like, to revisit a place where I had spent agreeable, care-free hours. Lately I had very often recalled Grandfather Rakip's winter sheepfold — and on first thought there was nothing strange in recalling Grandfather Rakip's house, for I had lived in one of its two big rooms for a whole summer. The funny thing was that I would come to think about it quite unexpectedly and under circumstances that had nothing to do with it. The other day, for instance, as we were examining the draft for the next budget at an enlarged session of the managing board and, when we got to the paragraph about the administrative expenses, all of a sudden I remembered the little stone house, as I had known it, with the tilted chimney on its mossy roof. What could the administrative expenses have to do with Grandfather Rakip's little house?

Neither had the spruce copse which surrounded it anything to do with the portraits I had been painting of late. Yet it came into my mind, although it was part of an old, a very old mountain world, whereas all my models, without exception, were people belonging to our most recent days. There was a senior founder from the Electrometal Factory among them. What could this senior founder have in common with the spruce copse or with those impassable wastelands? Nothing, of course, and that is just why his image appeared on the canvas somewhat pale and soulless. That little spruce copse got in the way. It got between him and me and threw a shadow on his face and maybe that was why it looked so pale.

Anyhow, I was not doing too well with the portraits of my contemporaries; and the less pleased I was with my canvases, the more often I thought about Grandfather Rakip's winter sheepfold and the fresh spruce copse in the wild wastelands of Trigrad. That is why I set out on my journey in the best of spirits, secretly hoping that after I had rinsed my eyes in the limpid, ice-cold water of the little stream that flows past Grandfather Rakip's apiary, I should have more luck with the portraits and the faces of my models would no longer look at me from the canvases with pale, unnaturally tired faces.

That is what I thought, blowing from time to time into my hands, because the steel of the cursed steering-wheel simply froze my fingers stiff with cold. Being a lover of comfort, I had fitted my jeep up with fine-looking canvas doors which fastened from inside with beautiful wire clasps. With the hood taut, these doors formed a rectangular box, very pleasant to sit in. The wind was fended off, thundering and howling past the sides and over the top of the canvas box, where it was cosy enough inside and where you did not shiver with cold if you had on a heavy topcoat. That was how it had been, but now there were holes in the canvas (I had given up mending them) and terrible cold gusts came in through them. Cold, stormy gusts were, in fact, forcing their way into the car, so that the rectangular hood was making persistent and desperate efforts to turn into a balloon. Any sort of cosiness was out of the question.

At dawn I arrived at Ihtiman. They had just opened the snack bar and my jade pulled up in front of it. Oh, those early-rising little taverns with their sinister yellow eyes, dimmed with the morning cold! Its sheet-iron stove was red-hot from the burning pine chips, and there was a smell of cooked tripe soup coming from the kitchen where the steam from the boiling soup was rising above the cauldron and filling the air with an exhilarating savour. I felt so fine that while I was warming my hands over the stove, my evil presentiments evaporated and I said to myself for the thousandth time that the world had been built up rationally and that without its little ups and downs it would not be half so beautiful.

After the first soup I ordered a second, and maybe would have swilled down a third had I not been a little ashamed of the young, red-cheeked waitress. You have to observe a certain decency in front of women, even when you are ravenous as a wolf.

Whether it was the soup or the fire, or because I had so abruptly changed my surroundings, I suddenly felt

easy and gay, and perfectly at home. I could hardly refrain from talking to the waitress. I wanted to talk to someone. I wanted to say: 'Well now, why are you wasting your time here?' And then, when she would sit on a chair at my table, pulling down her skirt in her shyness, not to let her knees show, I would invite her to come along with me on my long journey, because I had a free place in the jeep, right in front next to me. I would also tell her that on our arrival at Kesten I would buy her a tufted rug, a wonderful rug that could be used both as a bed-cover and as a blanket. I would tell her something like that or anything else that happened to come into my mind. I should certainly have accosted this red-cheeked early riser, but when I turned my head to smile at her, the door suddenly creaked open and a crush of men came noisily into the tripe-soup shop.

Then I suddenly forgot all about my waitress — the young woman with red cheeks and breasts bulging under the bodice of her apron, vanished from my world. There was only an open door and beyond it — a dim morn shimmering like a New Year's card with splendid snow. Cold white snowflakes drifted down, covering the desolate street.

Do you think I was struck all of a heap, or a victim suddenly to ominous premonitions, or that I decided to take refuge in flight back home, before my retreat was cut off by the white shroud? You would be quite mistaken if you thought so, for, before setting out, I had tucked away a few canvases, on which I had laid the ground colour for winter landscapes, under the back seat of the car. And then you must remember that I was travelling not just with any kind of car, but with a jeep, which had double gears and simply hummed when rolling over snow.

When I came out of the gorge, the snow gradually turned into a cold drizzling rain. I stepped on the gas, determined to reach Batak by noon, no matter what happened. But as soon as I had rushed down the first slope, I ran into mist and had, willy-nilly, to slow down. Mist was also creeping along the higher places and the road was clear only in the spots openly exposed to the wind.

I arrived at Batak at about one o'clock in the afternoon. I crept out of the jeep frozen stiff and probably blue all over. I put up a show of whistling to myself, so that the people would not take me for a sappy, spoiled man of the city, or a poor novice in long, hard journeys. I did not want to be taken by these people, in whose veins ran the blood of many generations of heroes — certainly I did not want, at least outwardly, to be taken for anything less hardy than they were. And so, whistling to myself carelessly, I entered the tavern and did not make a bee-line to the stove that was burning invitingly in the middle of the hall, but stopped in the doorway as if hesitating as to whether it was worth my while to spend a few minutes there, or if it were better to continue on my way, as would be more fitting for an experienced man inured to hardships and cold. I lingered for a while, then stepped up to one of the tables that were farther away from the entrance, sat down on a wooden stool and lit a cigarette. I noticed that the match was shaking between my fingers — the cursed match betrayed me, and I was angry with myself for having forgotten my lighter at home. A lighter was a more solid object and betrayed you less when your fingers trembled. I pulled on my cigarette and threw a careless glance around. But as I was frozen and tired and the earth seemed to be rocking under my feet — which often happens when you travel in a car for a long time without getting out — everything seemed askew and out of its place, as if the things had walked out of a painting by Chagall.

I cannot remember how long I had been looking round, but suddenly I noticed a glass of cognac in front of me. The glass was neither hanging in the air nor upside down, as it might have looked in one of Chagall's canvases. That is why I reached out my numbed hand, got hold of it and poured its contents down my throat. I like cognac and always drink it with pleasure even when I am not cold.

Then I wiped my lips and looked about me. The things in the tavern no longer merged into one another. I saw them clearly, each one in its proper place. There were a few visitors, all men chatting softly as they sat in a circle around the big iron stove. Behind the counter stood a stoutish man, wearing a green quilted jacket buttoned from the waist up. He had an apron tied about his waist, which, maybe, was not an apron at all, but a table cloth, for it had neither pockets nor shoulder-straps. He was leaning on his elbows against the tin-covered counter and looking at the visitors around the stove, whom he obviously neither saw nor heard, so preoccupied was he with his own thoughts. Nor did the people around the stove pay any attention to him.

At my table sat a man deep in thought, and silently looking at me. He was smoking leisurely, taking deep puffs of smoke and holding it for long spells in his chest. He was big, broad-shouldered, and his thick coarse coat, lined with sheepskin, made him look almost like a giant. He had a long face with high cheek-bones. It was swarthy, with deep furrows on both sides of the mouth, and with a clear-cut heavy lower jaw and a bony, almost square chin. This stern manly face looked as if it had been carved out of granite with a stone-cutter's chisel. It was topped by a high sloping forehead and thick eyebrows that met over a pair of large, light blue eyes shining with warmth. The man was the embodiment of strength and tremendous will-power, but he did not look harsh, no sternness emanated from him, although his features and figure were rugged and rude. They were softened, or rather vivified, by his eyes, thoughtful and clever, as if aware of their power, and therefore slightly over self-confident and caressingly condescending, the intelligent and beautiful eyes of a powerful man.

But there was something in his appearance that jarred. It was not just 'something', but rather a number of the things that make people say of somebody that he is slack in his appearance. The man was clean-shaven, but obviously had not had a haircut for a long time, for tufts of greying hair stuck out above his ears. He had a soft camel hair muffler round his neck and this, maybe once elegant, now hung over his chest, faded and with frayed ends. The two top buttons of his huge fur-lined, coarse cloth coat were missing and some stitches had come undone at the waist of his thick hand-knitted woollen sweater and shagged strands of wool dangled down. His pants, made of fine wide-striped brown corduroy, were worn and shabby and shining at the knees. One sensed negligence in that man, negligence which was alien to his nature, and therefore struck one at first glance. Despite his greying hair, he did not look more than forty.

He was sitting at the other side of the table and when I looked at him he nodded to me smiling almost imperceptibly. But however imperceptible his smile, there was a deal of condescension in it, and I felt myself blushing.

'Was the cognac for you?' I asked, trying to make my voice sound as casual as possible. The cognac had warmed me and I felt better.

'Makes no difference,' my neighbour replied. He was now watching me quietly and with indifference.

'Yes,' I nodded in agreement, 'it makes no difference, of course, but I wouldn't like to take other people's drinks.'

With these words I knocked on the table and called to the man standing behind the counter, and ordered him to bring a glass of cognac.

He carried out my order quickly, without any bustling about. I seemed to have startled him, for I had called out my order pretty loudly. Even the people around the stove turned their heads a little.

'And I wouldn't like to drink alone,' my neighbour laughed. This time his laugh was genuine and unrestrained, and it lent a very attractive and congenial air to his face. But, nevertheless, the air of good-natured condescension had not completely melted away. 'I don't care to drink alone,' he repeated.

And without asking me whether I did or did not care to have another drink, he ordered one more cognac for me, and on top of it all asked the man behind the counter to prepare a snack for me, although I had not asked him to make any orders on my behalf.

'Cut a few slices of dry sausage and warm it up on the grill,' my neighbour completed his order.

'Listen,' I said with an offended air, 'why do you give orders on my behalf and on my account?'

He sipped his cognac and did not answer at once. I began to whistle to myself, to show him that I did not care a straw about his answer and that he was at liberty not to answer me at all if he chose.

Thus we sat silent for a time, and then he suddenly started talking as if utterly unheedful of my sharp remarks.

'Our landlord,' he said, 'keeps the dry sausage hidden away behind the counter and cuts from it only for his regular customers.'

'That's his own business,' I said, shrugging my shoulders.

'Yes,' he nodded, 'but you wouldn't have seen a single slice of it without my intervention!'

In speaking to me he used the familiar Bulgarian form of 'thou'. A strange fellow! I did not know whether I ought to show him that I was seriously angry, or just dismiss the matter with a wave of my hand. But I felt much better after the cognac, and did neither.

'He serves dry sausage only to his regular customers, and to the more prominent local people,' continued my neighbour, 'or to some newcomer, if he is favourably impressed by him at first sight.'

'And why do you think that I did not impress him favourably?' I burst out angrily.

He looked me over from head to foot with such affable and good-natured condescension that I felt awkward.

'People here usually judge a man's worth by his stature, by the strength of his shoulders and by how firmly he stands on his feet.'

'In that case,' I said bitingly, 'you'll most probably gobble up all the dry sausage that this man has in store! You are' I said stressing my words, 'undoubtedly a first-ranker in this respect.'

He cast a long glance at me and was quiet. I had the impression that a shade of sorrow or of resentment fell across his face, for his bright eyes darkened, and the ghost of a sad and maybe bitter smile twitched the corners of his fine sensitive lips. Actually, I was the one who had the right to be offended. True, I had not his Herculean figure, but neither was I a Tom Thumb, deserving to be looked down on with condescension. But even if I had been a Tom Thumb, would any well-bred chap have kept rubbing in any natural defect I happened to have? A defect, I couldn't help? I am no crank about figures, and never thought I was an Apollo, God forbid! But I am 5 feet 6 inches in height and am satisfied, although this height is nothing to boast of for a man. I was also thirty years old, had my plans for organizing an exhibition of my works, and had started painting a gallery of portraits of contemporary types, so that even if I had had nothing else, that alone would have been enough to justify me in paying no attention to people like the man sitting opposite, who were apt to pat their acquaintances on the shoulder, to assume a patronizing attitude towards them and look down their noses at the whole world. That is what I was thinking, yet who knows why, and seemingly against my will, I took out a box of cigarettes and offered it to him. The right thing would have been for him to take a cigarette, as is the generally established custom among smokers, who never refuse a cigarette when offered them. But my table companion, this considerate man, waved the box away with a contemptuous smile as he shook his head.

'Too mild for me,' he said and added: 'Those are women's cigarettes.'

Of course, he was not right at all, because my cigarettes were best quality, but of the brand that among smokers was considered as one of the strongest. He obviously wanted to nettle me, and that for a second time, but I pretended not to have noticed it. What sense was there in starting a dispute over such a trifling question. Grandfather Rakip insisted, for instance, that he rode in an ox cart more softly and comfortably than in my jeep, and I never contradicted him.

He pulled a crumpled packet of third-quality Bouzloudja cigarettes from his pocket, selected one, tapped it several times on the table and then lit it. He smoked in silence, as before, taking long slow pulls. He went

on smoking like this, seemingly oblivious of my presence. He was staring at the opposite window, but was obviously not at all interested in what was going on in the street. A few tiny scattered snowflakes were drifting down. The street was deserted.

The landlord came with a dish of dry sausage, slightly heated over the smouldering embers, and placed it on the table with a few toasted slices of bread. I suddenly felt as hungry as a wolf. I was so hungry that I felt a pain in my gullet. This was surely due to the smell of the dry sausage. But the same thing happened as before, when I was overcome with resentment at the man's behaviour, I took out my cigarette box to treat him to a cigarette. Instead of seizing the fork and picking up a slice of the dry sausage, I hastily took out my pencil and started sketching his face on the back of the bill of fare which lay by the bread-dish. While he was staring at the window, I was endeavouring, with a throbbing heart, to catch his expression. I say 'with a throbbing heart', because I had the feeling that I was robbing him, as if I had sneaked into a strange house without knocking at the door. I was drawing his face with the same eagerness, with which a minute or two before I had been getting ready to devour the toasted bread and warmed up sausage. He was leisurely smoking a second cigarette, unheedful of me and of the whole world.

When I had sketched the principal features of his face on the paper, I reached out with my left hand to the plate and thrust several slices of sausage into my mouth. I found them tasteless and tough, and felt loathe to chew them. I did not reach out for the plate a second time and had quite forgotten the bread. That wolfish appetite seemed never to have been in my stomach and eyes: I felt satiated.

The blood rang in my ears, my heart throbbed with excitement. It was throbbing with excitement and with joy, for suddenly in a matter of seconds I realized that I had discovered what I had been unconsiously looking for during the last few months. For this man seemed indeed the embodiment of all my models: the senior founder in the Electrometal Works, the constructor on the Land-Improvement Board, and the power production professor from the Sofia Polytechnical Institute. He seemed to embody them all, like a focal point of power, thought and feeling, while at the same time he was quite different from them, and absolutely unique. It was just such a model that I needed, if I was to express on a single canvas and in a single vivid image the features of the times in which we were all living. I looked at him repeatedly, asking myself: was he not the living symbol of our epoch? For the men who were hammering out our epoch were powerful like him, because they had come triumphant out of the battle against the old world. They were handsome like him, because they were dreaming of the Argonauts' Golden Fleece, and were bent on soaring high up beyond the planets, towards the stars. They were self-confident like him, because they believed in their ideals and the thought of giving them up never entered their minds. If the Rococo period danced the minuet to Mozart's trivial Light Night Music, the while it held its hoopskirt in its dainty pink fingers and invited you to forget your grief and join the solemn quadrille of His Grace the Duke, why should not the portrait of a man so staunch reflect the epoch in which we, his contemporaries, were living?

If the soul of the man was as lovely. . . I could paint his portrait and without any compunction write under it 'A Hero of Our Times' or something like that. You smile skeptically? But why, if I may ask? You should take off your hat to lucky chance when you have come upon a long sought model.

But I did not take off my hat, because I knew that I had a long journey still ahead of me.

My jaded jeep was waiting by the sidewalk, and although apparently indifferent, was a wretched sight to look upon. The snow, however thin the fall, had covered the hood, and had even got inside through the numerous holes in the canvas, so that the front seat was covered with a large, snow-white napkin. My travel bag in the back which was full of provisions, was also drifted over. I knew that the fine snow could penetrate even through

the tiniest crevices and was not surprised. I turned my back to the wind, cupped my hands and lit a cigarette. I had no time to waste, but who knows why did not feel like setting out at once. I just stood on the sidewalk, staring at the jeep and smoking.

At that moment my new friend, the man whose face I had just sketched very carefully, came out of the tavern. He towered two heads above me and, clad as he was in his sheepskin coat, was maybe twice as broad-shouldered as I was. Greying curls of thick hair jutted out from under his skier's cap. He came up to me without uttering a word, then asked me where I was bound for, as if that did not interest him in the least. He was obviously asking me this question just for the sake of saying something and to avoid keeping awkwardly mum. I answered him in a casual way, as if it were a question of going up to the neighbouring hamlet. He cast a long look at me, then measured my Willis with somewhat skeptical eyes and turned to me:

'To Kesten village in this bone-shaker?'

I could not make out whether he was asking this question just to kill time or because he was indeed surprised, but I was stung both by his tone and by his words, and therefore made no reply but just shrugged my shoulders. Why should he call my jeep a bone-shaker? Even if it was a bone-shaker, he was the last man in the world who ought to call it so. If the hood of my jeep had seen better days, his own muffler, or his trousers, for that matter, were not in a much better state. And then, even if your car is a bone-shaker, you may be attached to it. In these things there are no hard and fast rules for the human heart. There was Grandfather Rakip, for instance. Next to his apiary and his granddaughter, he loved his old dog more than anything else in the world, although it was a decrepit creature, a mere shadow of a dog. But I was sure that the old man would never part with this dog, not even for a golden Turkish five-pound coin. He loved it, although the dog was nothing but a wreck. That's how people are, and that's why I would never say to a man that his car is a bone-shaker or anything like it.

But in that moment, while we were standing on the sidewalk, I was not so piqued about what he said of the jeep as disillusioned with the image I had formed of him a while ago, while we were in the tavern. With his rude words he had pretty seriously spoilt that image. For a positive hero who dreamt of soaring high up beyond the planets would hardly tell his friend to his face that his car was a miserable wreck, worthy of the sad old epitaph: *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

As I said, I was slightly disillusioned, for I felt that a wonderful discovery, a fine subject, was slipping out of my hands.

'With this bone-shaker to Kesten village?' my new acquaintance repeated, laughing. 'That's a fine idea!'

'The jeep is not so bad,' I snapped back, 'it has a four-wheel drive.'

He made a disdainful, mocking grimace.

'In dry weather,' he said instructively, 'your veteran might manage somehow to make its way to the military post at Dospat; but in this snow it won't be able to get even as far as the burnt-out sawmill. It will either get stuck in a snowdrift, or roll over at some slippery bend.'

'It has a four-wheel drive,' I repeated mechanically I wanted to bring some strong argument in favour of my jeep and put his sinister predictions to shame, but nothing came into my mind. In order to change this unpleasant conversation, I asked him how he had got to know these places and whether he really knew them well.

My question did not seem to stir him to give any more detailed explanations. He knew these places, because he had had the opportunity of travelling about in them. He was a driller by profession, something like a prospector for ore. Now he was due to go to Teshel but the cursed weather was preventing him from setting out. He warned me not to be deceived by the fact that the snowflakes were drifting down here thinly scattered in the air. It might be so here, but in the mountains the snow was falling as out of a funnel. It had started yesterday morning. Last night one of the forestry lorries, the last to get through, had arrived and after that there had been no more. The driver, after parking the lorry in a dry place, drank 250 grammes of cognac to get his frozen limbs warm again. The snow had cut off all communications and so my new friend was forced to stay here until the snow-ploughs got to work and opened up the road to Dospat.

What a man! A hero in appearance, yet faint-hearted. A real hero dreaming to get beyond the planets would not have been scared of a snowfall. Appearances are often misleading, indeed.

So I was thinking as I tried to settle an important question: to set out, or not to set out. I was not at all pigeon-hearted, yet the road that lay ahead of me was by no means an easy one. Whatever they tell you, we must admit that winter journeys are connected with certain inconveniences, even when you are driving a car that has a four-wheel drive. I had not travelled much in winter, but I did know people who had had greater experience along this line and whom you could believe.

I weighed up all eventualities in my mind and did not arrive at any positive conclusion. The question, however, settled itself, very simply and automatically. While I was pondering about this and that, my hands had taken out the brush for sweeping off the snow from under the front seat and had begun assiduously to remove the snow, from the seat and from the windscreen and from the side canvases of the hood. I was sweeping away the snow as if I had absolutely no misgivings. Probably that is why my new friend asked me in a surprised voice:

'So you've really decided to go on?'

His surprise pleased me. Courage always awakens surprise in the faint-hearted. In fact, it was not a question of displaying any particular courage, because the crossing of the mountain was not an insurmountable obstacle; after all, it was only yesterday that the snow had begun to fall. Nevertheless, I was pleased, for you are always pleased when you surprise somebody. I had once told Nourié (I had simply lied to her) that I had gone out on a hunt for white bears during one of my (imaginary) voyages in the Arctic region. Nourié looked with surprised eyes, and I remember that I felt very pleased.

'Of course, I'll go on,' I said.

My friend paused for a minute.

'You'll get caught at one of the windier places,' he said, and then added: 'Heavy fog falls up there in the mountain and the bends are sharp and difficult. . . you'll surely roll over somewhere.'

'You never can tell,' I smiled.

'You seem to be very reckless,' my acquaintance said, shaking his head.

I did not answer. What sense was there in arguing? I did not say another word, but filled up the tank with gasoline from the can and like a man who knows what he is about, started getting ready to set forth, i. e. buttoned up my short sheepskin coat to the uppermost button and stamped the snow off my shoes. My friend watched me all the time with a jeer and with sympathy, never troubling to hide his feelings: he seemed to be an outspoken, frank fellow who never dissembled.

I sat down behind the wheel and blew into my hands.

'Wait a minute!' my friend said suddenly. He turned and went into the tavern without telling me why I was to wait. I had already got accustomed, to a certain extent, to his strange behaviour, and just shrugged my shoulders. After all, since it was a matter of minutes, I might just as well wait for him, and let the engine get warmed up.

He came out of the tavern, carrying a tremendous, packed knapsack on his back. Two pannikins hung from its straps, a water bottle, a small spade, and an instrument which looked very much like a pick but was not a pick, was fastened with leather straps under the upper canvas flap. Everything that one noticed in this man at first glance — his height, his sheepskin coat, his knapsack and even his slightly rude behaviour — impressed you either by its size or by the power which it emanated.

He came to the jeep, opened the right-hand door and threw his knapsack behind the front seat, after which he stood it up next to my travel bag. Then he bent down, crawled in and sat down next to me, banging the door shut. He took out a cigarette and lit it.

I continued to step lightly on the gas.

'Come on, open out and let's move on,' he muttered without looking at me. 'What are you waiting for?'

He said this quietly, almost softly, but then suddenly grew impatient: 'Aren't we going to start?'

I put the engine into first gear, slowly letting out the clutch. My old jade shivered, sneezed once or twice, and then set out reluctantly along the white road.

We were both silent. A moment later he asked me about my profession, what I was doing for a living, and I told him. I even told him that I was going to Kesten village on a special assignment — to look for a tufted rug for the big national exhibition. But I was not sure that he was listening. He kept stubbornly silent, and it seemed to me that there was something sad in his silence and gradually I lost all desire to talk to him about anything at all. I was not sure at all why it was that his silence seemed to have a grain of sadness in it. I had no time to stop and think it over, because as we climbed up the mountain the snow was falling more heavily and our journey was becoming ever more difficult and dangerous.

The snow was falling, soft and thick, raising a mobile white barrier in front of us, and reluctantly receding to make way for us. The windscreen wiper creaked and was hardly able to secure 'windows' the size of the palm of my hand for our eyes. Somehow we did move forward, but things got particularly bad when we ran into fog. Fog and snow — it was a white, slushy mess, in which there was neither right nor left, neither up nor down; there was only one thing to do, to get our bearings by the hard ground under the wheels, nothings else. If it had not been for the hard ground under the wheels to guide us, we might have imagined we were not actually travelling, but moving in a dream, in a white astral nebula.

I geared in the front wheels. The engine now drove all four wheels of my jeep, and although it was choking with the strain, it no longer skid in the thick covering of snow, and did not reel to right and left as if it were drunk, but kept moving steadily ahead, though at a very low speed.

We were travelling, maybe, at only about five miles an hour. The speedometer was out of order, so I could not tell exactly at what rate we were travelling, but that was what I supposed. I turned on my yellow headlights — the yellow headlights were supposed to penetrate fog. The yellow glare of my headlights, however, did not penetrate the fog, it simply dissolved in it, only changing the colour of the astral nebula from white to yellow.

We were moving forward, but in what direction? To left or right? Toward the rocks that loomed up to the right side of the road, or towards the abyss that was gaping to our left? I had no idea. And I did not try to get one, for nothing would have come out of it anyway, or more precisely, nothing good would have come out of it. That is why I did not even try to stretch my imagination and guess the directions, but listened to my neighbour's instructions which he gave me in his customary curt tone and in the form of peremptory commands:

'To the left!'

'To the right!'

'Straight on!'

Or:

'Full left!'

'Full right!'

'Hold straight on!'

He was obviously accustomed to speaking categorically and curtly. Every man has his way of speaking, and I did not hold it against him, for I always try to understand people and take them as they are.

In fact, if it had been up to me alone to decide what to do about going on, I would have stopped at once and not have budged another inch. A trip in such a heavy snowfall and thick fog was an adventure, romantic indeed, but utterly reckless. I was fond of romance, but had no taste for adventures and recklessness. Thus, for instance, when I was in Kesten village last year, I tried to be alone with Nourié as often as possible, but whenever the two of us were alone, I took care not to betray my thoughts and feelings by so much as a glance or word. I knew that, if she grasped certain things and understood them, no good would come out of it for me or for her. Adventure might have turned romance into the most hideous prose, with consequences of a very unpleasant nature. And why should I complicate my life? When painting, I like to use pure colours and seldom convey a tricky mixture of colours from the palette to the canvas.

So, had it been up to me to decide the further course of our journey, I would have pulled up my jeep on a level spot, and have waited there for the fog to lift. But, in spite of everything, we still managed to make some headway and did not come to a halt, although we sometimes came across level places. The credit for it must go to my remarkable companion. I was only the mechanical executor of his will, led by and unreservedly relying on his sense of orientation. Thus, the further course of our journey, although I was the one who actually held the wheel in my hands, depended on and was exclusively determined by my companion.

He was a powerful person. He seemed to be of that category of imperious men who were capable, without too great an effort, of bending the wills of other people to theirs; who at crucial moments took the situation in hand without showing any hesitation or fear of responsibility — men accustomed to playing high, gamblers used to staking their all. Such a man was my companion. I had been wrong a little while before when I had thought that he was not quite up to the wonderful image I had formed of him! Compared with the image I had now built up in my heart, my first idea of him was pale and colourless.

That is what I was thinking, but my thoughts were disconnected: my shirt stuck to my back with sweat; my eyes ached from constantly peering into the yellow nebulous chaos whirling in front of the headlights; and my ears were so constantly pricked not to miss any of the commands with which my companion directed my course that I felt my head exceedingly heavy, as if filled with some weighty molten metal. This was an unpleasant feeling, and when you experienced it for a long time, you ceased to be talkative and got a worried and down-trodden expression.

This was the way we travelled for one hour and a half or two hours. (I had no possibility of looking at my watch, for it was a pocket one). At last I noticed that the fog was thinning and lifting in front of the headlights, that golden snowflakes were flitting in front of us and that we were moving along a soft, golden road. I knew that all these golden things were illusions, that they were due to the yellow glow of the headlights, but nevertheless they looked beautiful and were a joy to the eye. Then the heavy feeling in my head began to go and gradually left me, and I felt better. And who knows why, I pressed the metal disc of the hooter and laughed out loud. Not very loud, but I laughed.

We gradually left the road that wound through the forest behind and climbing all the time upward, crossed many bare and open places. And the more we advanced, the farther behind us lay the quiet heavy snowfall, as we penetrated ever more deeply into a realm of frightful storms. The golden snowflakes whirled in terrible tempestuous columns, pouncing fiercely upon the windscreen, covering the wiper and hindering its automatic motion. The wind was churning up the dry snow on the road, lifting it and tossing it over us, as if a gigantic carding machine were spewing great clouds of combed wool over us.

It had begun to grow dark. Sharp, bitingly cold gusts of wind began to invade the car, coming in under the hood, along with the murky nebula that preceded the endless darkness. The wind was mixed with invisible snow dust, microscopic dust, penetrating through the pedal openings and through the numerous slits in the canvas. It was really no dust at all, but a cloud of little needles, electrified with cold, pricking the skin of our faces, stiffening up our hands and feet and in some inexplicable manner making their way through our overcoats and pants, right up to our very knees. That

was the unenviable position in which we found ourselves after we had left behind the white silence of the thick fog and quiet snow.

The howling of the wind drowned the roar of the engine. It was not exactly a howling, but sounded like the thunderous roar of a dozen waterfalls; at least that is what it sounded like to me, because I was wearing no cap with earflaps as my neighbour was doing. A dozen waterfalls seemed to be thundering together, and I was afraid that the torn hood of the jeep might fly up in the air at any minute. Such was the raging storm we came up against on climbing higher up to the more exposed places.

And yet, the snowstorm was not the worst of our trials. We were in the most terrible predicament, when my docile jade started reeling to right and to left along the slippery road, now towards the rocks, now towards the precipice gaping dark on one side. During these horrible moments, the wheel lost its hold over the car, which did not obey it at all, but, as if driven on by some insane supernatural forces seemed to be doing its best to send us to our death and to reduce itself to a pile of miserable crushed iron. I knew what I had to do at such moments of desperate madness — I let the jeep fishtail a bit, and then, in the split second, just before it tumbled over the precipice or clashed against the rocks, I would lightly straighten the wheel and the jeep would go on again, docile and tame, along the right road.

This is how I saved the situation several times, but it cost me a lot of nervous strain: those who say that encounters with death are interesting or exciting are downright liars. I was losing my strength and at every fresh skid lost my hold on things, became uncertain, and felt a disgusting weakness. My head swam. And because I felt uncertain and overwhelmed by despair, I failed to feed gas regularly to the engine, did not keep to the steady speed which is necessary on such occasions, and this caused the cursed jeep to skid ever more dangerously and madly at the exposed bends.

But we kept moving ahead. Yes, we somehow managed to move ahead, but my companion had sunk into a terrible silence. He, who had been so talkative at the places where the fog had been impenetrable and had so diligently watched the road, had now the air of a slumbering man or a man absorbed in gloomy thoughts, indifferent to the whole world. We skidded towards bottomless precipices, staggered against ragged rocks that loomed up in the glare of the headlights, but he did not budge, did not even wince and never uttered a word. Yet, it was obvious — and I was well aware of the fact that he was neither sleeping nor drowsing. He was thinking about his own affairs and had no interest in anything. Perhaps he had too much trust in my skill as a chauffeur? Or he was recklessly relying on his lucky star? In any case his behaviour was strange.

And, as a result of his strange behaviour, or because I was fed up with the dangerous skidding, I pressed down the brakes lightly, and the jeep (my good and loyal jeep) came slowly and obediently to a halt, with its tail turned slightly to the left of the central line of the road. The deviation was insignificant, and the tail of the car was pointing to the rocks and not to the abyss that lurked ominously to the right.

I mopped the cold sweat from my brow, took a deep breath and suddenly felt spent with fatigue.

My companion was silent.

'It's very slippery at the bends,' I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'The snow is frozen and has formed a crust,' I added.

He made no reply.

I fumbled for my cigarettes and lit one. The wind was no longer roaring thunderously, but howling all the time, racking your nerves like a pack of hungry wolves. (I have never heard wolves do that, but just imagined that the wind then was howling like a hungry pack of wolves.) So we stopped, slightly athward the central line of the road, with our engine out and with only the small sidelights on. Inside, under the hood, it was quite dark. In the intervals between a couple of gusts of wind we heard the dry, frozen snow lashing against the windscreen.

'Afraid?' my companion asked.

I started but did not answer.

He laughed a bitter laugh, then heaved a deep sigh and was silent again. My feet were numb with cold. My eyelids were heavy with sleep. I pushed my hands deeper down into the pockets of my short overcoat and closed my eyes.

'Pretty kettle of fish!' my companion said. 'What now?' There was not the least reproach in his voice. He was simply expressing his astonishment, but there was a melancholy note in his voice, that was unusual in a man with his rugged, imperious character.

'Now,' I replied, trying to look self-confident and unconcerned, 'now we shall have a good sleep, and when we wake up... when we wake up,' I repeated with an involuntary cold shiver, 'the sun will be up. it will be daylight... and we shall continue our journey.'

He seemed to agree with me, because he made no objection. And why should he object? Tomorrow the sun would be up, it would be broad daylight again, diamonds would be glittering on the silvery covering of ice on the road that would look like a gigantic necklace winding in spirals across the mountain. And, on both sides of this spiral necklace, old white firs capped with snow would be standing guard.... A few silver pines would surely stand by the side of the old, snow-covered firs, like delicate snow queens from the fairy tales. If they were not there, they would have to be invented to lend greater beauty to the picture. For how could you paint a picture without inventing something? If you stopped inventing things you would become like a mathematical formula standing on a pair of legs.... You would become something like little Pinoccios, little wooden Pinoccios, with an electronic brain placed in a geometrical box. Such a brain cannot invent snow queens.... or pines, or snow-capped firs. What this electronic brain would say would be: 'The road is like a parabola, it winds like a hyperbola, turns like an elipse and has the form of an elipsoid!' Oh, it would never say that the road was like a necklace... silvery, embroidered in golden thread and with tiny pearls like grains of seasand glistening in the shimmering filigree.... It would never say such things, because they are illusions, deceptions, and illusions are unknown to an electronic brain which can never deceive.

I thought of many other things, too, not knowing whether I was dreaming while awake or asleep. But what did it matter, anyway, whether I was dreaming while awake or asleep? Not at all, of course, and my companion ought not to have hindered me from dreaming, because I had not asked him to do anything for me. But he was shaking me pretty forcefully by the shoulder with his heavy hand, so I asked him what had happened and what was worrying him.

Then, when he heard me speak, he opened the door of the jeep and got out in the snow.

'Move into my place!' he commanded. He could, of course, have been less gruff, but I had already got used to his manners, so I made no objection. I was the host and he the guest, and it was only too natural to make allowances for a guest. If he wished to sit in the left-hand seat behind the wheel — all right — I was quite ready to let him have his way. It was all one to me.

I moved to his seat which was more comfortable, because there were no pedals there to get in the way of your feet, and you could stretch out your legs more freely. I complied with his request and he unbuttoned his huge fur coat, took it off and slung it over my shoulders. Either he found that it was in his way, or wanted to thank me with this gesture for having let him have my seat behind the wheel. I was about to protest, but he seemed to have guessed my intention and hastened to shut the door.

Then he hastened round the jeep, got in behind the wheel and put on the headlights, turned the key, stepped on the gas and the engine started humming. It had not got completely cold, and by stepping on the gas my companion succeeded in breathing life into it.

In front, in the beam of the headlights, a maze of golden constellations continued their mad whirling dance.

I saw him pull the speed lever, but did nothing to stop him. I felt very tired and terribly sleepy. The wheel looked like a child's toy in his hands. A giant, mounted on a small pony, was the idea that crossed my mind. And I smiled, because the idea was funny. At the same moment the jeep pulled out, smoothly, imperceptibly, without that inevitable skid to one side which I had secretly and anxiously expected. It was obvious that he had had experience in winter driving. What a man! There was no sense in stopping him from having his own way.

The swarms of snowflakes began dancing still more wildly in front of me, and those waterfalls began roaring again in the hood. But under his coarse sheepskin coat I felt warm and comfortable. Only my feet ached with cold, because although the sheepskin coat reached to below my knees, it did not cover my feet. My lids were heavy with sleep and I closed my eyes.

We must have travelled for an hour or two, or even a little longer. He was saying something, and his voice quickly dispelled the slumber into which I had sunk and which was very much like the astral nebula of a little while before. Before I got really conscious of his words, I realized, or rather became aware of the fact, that we had pulled up, that the engine had stopped and even our sidelights were turned off. Only the wind was howling past the hood and the snow was being driven against the windscreen.

'Look, can you get out?' his voice rang out.

'Why not?' I answered. 'Of course I'll get out right away,' I added with great assurance, pressing the handle of the canvas door.

The door opened at once, but it was with great difficulty that I dragged out my feet. They were frozen and numb, as if not belonging to me. I stepped out in the snow. At that place, on the right-hand side of the road, the wind had built up a great drift knee-deep. The driven snow whipped my face.

'Do you know where we are?' my companion asked, trying to outshout the gale.

I did not reply. What could I see in the darkness? During the whole of our trip I had been busy with various problems, and had not paid the slightest attention to the places throught which we had passed.

'This is Atem's Cabin!' my companion shouted into my ear. 'Do you hear? Atem's Cabin!'

Grandfather Atem's Cabin was perfectly all right with me. I knew that, tucked away here and there by the roadside, there was a number of old, very old, cabins, build of stone and mud, but which one of those long-abandoned winter sheepfolds was Atem's, I did not know. Nevertheless, I realized that we were somewhere in the neighbourhood of Lukitê village — half way to Kesten village, and I felt still colder.

'Follow me carefully, and keep in my steps!' my companion ordered and set out in front of me.

I stumbled and fell flat on the snow several times, because the cursed sheepskin coat was terribly heavy and its skirts tripped me up, not allowing me to walk faster. Whenever I fell, I sank into the dry, crisp snow, hastening to rise to my feet at once not to get too far behind my guide. I knew that to get behind in a snowstorm at night might end very unpleasantly. So, with my arms waving about, half blinded by the snow which got into my eyes, panting, bareheaded (my hat had been swept away who knows where), I stubbornly followed that man, aware of one thing above all — the beating of my heart. It was beating like a sledgehammer against my ribs.

I had no idea where we were going in the snowstorm and in that ice-cold darkness, and whether we would ever reach Atem's Cabin at all. The directions of the sensible horizon seemed to have been swept away by the wind and time itself to have been hopelessly buried under the snow. But I knew I had to keep walking and did.

At last we arrived at the place which was Atem's Cabin. My companion kicked open the door (I knew that by the crash I heard), calling out to me: 'Come in, but bend down your head, or you'll bump it against the lintel!' and he vanished through the opening into a darkness that was deeper and even more impenetrable than that in which I was moving. I followed him, crossing the threshold behind him.

How remarkable was this first and, in fact, last and only meeting with my hero. Of course, then I did not know and could not even suspect that in the coming days, weeks and months my attention would be focused all the time on his person, that many months later — one year after our first meeting — I should be still working hard on dozens of sketches seeking to find his true image, the great truth about this man that, to me at least, was still not clear. Then, during that bitterly cold, snowy night, I could not possibly suspect any of these things or guess what the future held in store for me.

Yet, I do remember some small details. Thus, when the pile of pine twigs kindled and flamed up in the fireplace and lit the room up brightly, he rose, wiped the dust off his hands and looked at me. Only two or three minutes had passed since we entered and I was still standing at the door. He glanced at me and at once burst into thunderous, merry laughter. That was quite shameless. It seemed that it never occurred to him that his laughter might hurt me and that anyway it was not decent for one man to laugh so much at another. When I asked him coldly what it was in me that had provoked his laughter, he looked really surprised.

'Don't you know what you look like?'

How could I know. I shrugged my shoulders.

He noticed then that I was not very pleased with his unrestrained outburst of merriment. His face suddenly became serious and he came up to me.

'Why don't you shake off the snow?' his voice was soft and solicitous. I never expected such velvety tones in the voice of this self-confident scoffer! He took his sheepskin coat off my shoulders, carried it to the wall opposite the fireplace and hung it there on a wooden peg stuck into the hollow between two jagged stones in the wall. His gait and movements were agile and soft like the movements and posture of a strong wild animal, which from its early age, from the time it was a suckling, had lived in the comfortable atmosphere of a modern and cultured home.

He took a dry pine twig from the floor and gave it to me.

'Knock the snow off your clothes with this twig,' he advised me, 'before it melts. Then sit down by the fire on this log here and warm yourself, but do not go too near the fire at once. And put a piece of wood on the fire now and then, while I run down to the road to get our baggage!'

So he intended to go down to the car! Cold shudders ran down my spine when I thought of the darkness and the whirling gusts of snow that awaited him outside. In some drift he might unexpectedly sink into a hollow, for instance, or get lost and go in an opposite direction to the place where the car was parked. Anything might happen on such a disgusting night! He might go on and on and find no car at all; he might not even be able to find the road or the path, but stumble into some thicket, and not even a thicket, but just white drifts of snow. In the dark he would surely not be able to tell whether those great piles were white or black. He would just stumble into them, and only then realize they were bushes. While wandering about the wastelands, he might come upon wolves, for it was in such weather that wolves usually made their assaults on the villages. That is why these nights are called 'wolf' nights.

These were the thoughts which troubled my mind while I was warming myself at the fire. I moved the log to the wall to make my seat more comfortable. I hoped the wolves would not be many. But most important of all was that he should not miss the way and get lost in that thicket. Because, covered as the bushes were with snow, they would look like anything but bushes. And then suddenly I realized that I was all wrong — because those bushes could not possibly look like anything at all: the starless night had covered them with magic hoods that made them invisible. Just as it was in the fairy tales. Only the eyes of wolves sparkle in such terrible nights.

I was startled by the shutting of the door. I had either been carried away by my thoughts or had dozed off, but I suddenly awoke with a jerk, because he had banged the door noisily. He came in like a northern god — huge, covered with snow, powerful, carrying with him the icy breath of the snowstorm, but at the same time fresh and smiling, as a northern god was expected to look. I looked at him in amazement.

'Good Lord! You've let the fire go out!' the god shook his head, frowning a little. But he was not angry.

'I must have dozed off for a minute,' I said somewhat confused, reaching quickly for the pile of pine twigs. I seized two dry pine tree tops and threw them over the embers. As I did this, I felt a dull pain in my knees and shoulders. If I made a grimace at that moment it was not from the pain, for I can bear such things. Once, at Grandfather Rakip's apiary it so happened that two bees stung me at once — two angry and ferocious bees. They stung me, and Nourié saw it because she was standing near me, and I dismissed the whole incident with a wave of the hand, although everything suddenly grew dark before me. Anyone in my place would surely have jumped and hollered. What I meant to say was that my face did not twist because of the pain when I reached out to take the pine kindling, but because I felt guilty before this man and as tiny and insignificant as a grain of sand.

He threw his knapsack and my travel bag on the floor, came up to the fire, fanned it into life and piled a heap of twigs over it. Then he went out for a while, and when he came back brought two big pieces of a cleft log covered with snow. After having arranged them properly so that he got a good fire burning, he looked at me smiling, and his smile was encouraging and cheerful.

'Now I'll brew a good hot cup of tea for you,' he said. 'I've got wonderful tea, you'll see how delicious it is. You have to take something to warm you up, you seem to have caught cold. Do you call that thing you're wearing a coat? How could you ever set out in mid winter and on such a long trip with a ridiculous coat like this? It may look fine, but it couldn't possibly keep you warm. You've got to have such a coat as mine to travel in winter across these wastelands. It is coarse and may not look anything, but if I wrapped you up properly in it and threw you out into the snow, I'll bet you wouldn't freeze even if you stayed out till tomorrow morning. You'd sleep as well as in a downy bed and dream very pleasant dreams. That's what my sheepskin coat is like.'

He was exaggerating the qualities of his sheepskin coat of course, but I did not contradict him. Capricious as he was (all gods are capricious) he might have said: 'Well, don't you believe me? Let's try it then.' And he might actually have wrapped me up in his sheepskin coat and thrown me out into the snow! He could have done it, I saw in his eyes that he could have done it. His light-blue eyes could be caressing and warm like a summer morn and cold and stern like lumps of ice. The hard, clear-cut lines of his face and, above all, his massive, lion-like jaw showed that he was surely as good as his word, that he would not be prepared to give up his slightest intention and that he had nothing in common with people inclined to make a difference between their words and their deeds. That is how he looked, and I decided that it would be wiser for me not to contradict him. Let him sing the praise of his sheepskin coat to his heart's content, if that gave him pleasure. Nourié used to say, for instance, that her favourite goat looked like a doe. She used to say it, though I knew perfectly well that her comparison was very far fetched, because bearded does just don't exist. But I did not contradict her either.

While I was turning this over in my mind, my companion silently unfastened his knapsack. He took out two cans, went out and came back in a few seconds with the two cans filled to the brim with snow. He put them near the fire and when the snow melted, poured the water from one of the cans into the other. He went out several more times, until the can that stood by the fire was filled to the brim with water.

We drank our tea eagerly, but in silence.

'Feeling better now?' he asked me.

I nodded.

'Spread your coat over those branches there, get my sheepskin coat and go to bed.'

I ought to have asked him what he was going to cover himself with, but who knows why I did not say a word, but got up from the log and trudged heavily to the place where dry pine twigs had been put on the floor in piles. Before I covered myself with his sheepskin coat a thought crossed my mind, and I laughed out loud. We had travelled together over quite a long distance; I had just had tea from his can; I was wearing his sheepskin coat, but I still did not know his name, nor did he know mine. That was what had made me laugh.

'What is your name?' I asked him, addressing him with the familiar Bulgarian form of 'thou', because I thought it was high time for me to follow his example.

He stared at me covered as I was with the sheepskin coat, as if weighing in his mind whether it was worth his while to answer my question, and did not reply at once. I felt snubbed, and the sheepskin coat weighed as heavy as a mountain on me.

'My name is Emilian,' he said at last. 'And my family name is Kirov. Emilian Kirov.' Then he turned to the fire with his back towards me: a back like a mountain ridge.

'Wait a bit,' I said to myself, 'you're putting on airs, but I'll teach you a lesson! I'll put you in a tight spot and make you regret a thousand times that you are behaving like this. Stuck up people always need a lesson!' I told him my name, although he was sitting with his back to me, pretending to have forgotten my presence. I also told him that I was an artist and that he must have noticed it when I was drawing his sketch in the tavern. I was sure that he had not noticed anything then, but I suggested that he had, on purpose. And then I asked him the question that was to put him in a tight spot:

'Emilian,' I asked, trying to conceal the spiteful little note in my voice, 'which of the world's great painters do you like best, and why?'

In asking my question I must have had the air of a hunter taking aim at big game.

He poked the embers to stir up a flame, then took a burning twig and lit his cigarette. It was only then that he turned to me. There was so much sarcasm and so much condescension in his eyes that I flushed and had the feeling that the fire was right close up to my face.

'Which of the famous painters I like best, is that your question?' He smiled and paused for a while. 'In the field of art I'm nothing but an ignoramus and a dilettant, but since you ask me, I'll tell you: the impressionists, of course, are those I like best, and more particularly, the early impressionists... Manet, Monet, Renoir, Dégas, etc. You'd be fully justified in asking me how I got to know them. Mostly from pictures in magazines... and maybe I've had the chance of seeing, among other things, some of their original works. But even if I hadn't seen any of their original works, and if I'd seen only colour reproductions and pictures of them, I'd still say that it's them I like best.... Why — that's a different matter, a personal question. Of the Russian realists I like Levithan best; and Repin to a certain extent, but I prefer Levithan.... Are you satisfied now or have you other questions to ask?'

I looked at him in amazement. My gun seemed to have misfired. All the questions which I had intended to ask him slipped out of my mind, and dispersed like scared birds. I looked at him in amazement and did not utter a word.

'Come on now!' he said, turning again to the fire, 'tuck your feet under the coat and keep quiet. It's time for you to go to sleep.'

A strange man, indeed! He treated me like a child! I felt that I ought to have resented it, for anyone would have resented such a condescending attitude. But, who knows why, I felt not the least resentment in my heart. What was more, I enjoyed being with him! Yes, humiliating as it may seem to you, I sincerely and with all my heart enjoyed being with him.

But only in my heart, of course. Otherwise, I did what everyone in my position would have done: I yawned

to show I was bored, turned my back to the fire and closed my eyes.

And suddenly I was carried away like a shadow into that white astral world, amid an infinity of quietly flying white stars. I knew that it was not an astral world and that there were no stars around me, but the most ordinary snowflakes were drifting down. Yet it was all beautiful, exquisitely beautiful, and I smiled. After all, the snowflakes did look like stars. I had read somewhere that there were many white stars in our small galaxy. What did many mean? Many meant endless numbers. I was flying, smiling, amid an infinity of white stars.

I do not know how long I wandered in this silent world of dreams, but suddenly I started and opened my eyes. There was no particular reason why I should start, for I was lying in the same place and nothing around me had changed. Only the snowstorm outside seemed to be howling louder, and the door was shaking noisily with the wind, creaking in its frame as if it were a living thing being fiercely lashed about with a whip.

I looked at the fire. There, round the fireplace, nothing unusual had happened. The flames were playing softly in the hearth and were reflected, lazily licking the stone wall opposite. Emilian sat as before, slightly bent, with his hands resting on his knees, motionless. Not a single muscle quivered in his face, he was as if petrified.

I looked at him and could hardly believe my eyes — his face looked very strange to me: familiar and unknown at the same time. It was as if some tender hand had deleted its severity and self-assurance, as well as its brutal force, self-confident and scornful of others, which struck you as soon as you saw him.

It was another Emilian now sitting at the fireplace — a sad Emilian, haggard, downtrodden and absorbed in himself, unconscious of the whirlwind outside and of the stone cabin, lost in an obscure sea of endless suffering. With tightly compressed lips, with half-closed eyes, with two deep furrows on both sides of his mouth, he looked like one who had just heard a terrible but just sentence passed on him and on all his past life.

I held my breath and my heart almost stopped beating: it was as if somebody was pressing it down with a heavy, icy hand. Slowly I turned to the wall and closed my eyes. The white astral world had vanished. The snowstorm was howling outside like a pack of one hundred wolves, and the thick deal door was jumping about like mad on its hinges and sobbing like a living thing.

What a morning it was! The whole world was white and fabulously clean.

In places the snow was waist deep. Where there were hollows and holes in the ground the snow was still deeper — God only knows what might have happened if you had fallen into such a hole! In the less exposed places, the wind had driven enormous snowdrifts — only the crowns of the pines showed above them. And these crowns of green tassels and needles were also hooded in white. The whole visible world — meadows, forests and mountains — was all white and pure, all covered with fresh, bright, virgin snow.

My jaded jeep, too, was almost covered over with this wonderful snow. It looked as if it had stood in the same place since the creation of the world and as if it would continue to stay there motionless and hopelessly covered until the end of time.

Why should it not stay there? My heart was gay and filled with gratitude. On this white and quiet morning I could bear no grudge against anyone.

I returned to the cabin and hastily stamped the snow off my feet.

A good fire was burning in the fireplace. Emilian sat on the three-legged stool, looking at me with a smiling face. Now he was neither self-confident and disdainful nor painfully sad, but was smiling up at me in a frank and cordial way, his eyes were caressing, and deep in my heart I had a feeling that these eyes enjoyed looking at me.

Then we spread a green canvas on the floor, lay a plentiful table and started eating greedily. We drank tea, ate the salted bacon which we had broiled over the embers, and exchanged a few businesslike remarks the while, about the near future and what we were going to do in the next few hours.

The near future did not look very comforting. Emilian said that the sky which was clouded over would soon send new falls of snow to the earth. He was ready to bet that the snow would begin to fall in a few hours time. At the places along the road which were more exposed to the wind, the snow was not deep and the jeep would be able to push its way through, although the tyres, between you and me, were more worn out than the elbows of his magnificent sheepskin coat. But those windy places alternated with more sheltered ones, and there, according to him, my jeep would sink body-deep into the snow. Its four-wheel drive would be of no avail in such snowdrifts. And the distance to the nearest village — Lukité — was not less than six miles. Emilian might manage in some way or other to make that distance, but what about me? . . . How far would I be able to go with the shoes I was wearing? What a fool I had been to set out on a trip across the mountains with such a pair of shoes! But even if my shoes had been all right, those six miles were too big a lump for me to swallow. He found this quite obvious and self-evident in view of my rather delicate towny constitution.

At this point in his monologue I interrupted him. I said that his impression of me was only superficial, that I was not at all delicate and had been around these places several times. And as to the six miles, I dismissed them with a wave of the hand, assuring him that he need not worry on that score. After all, six miles were not such a very long distance. Let us go to Lukité, I said, and in a day or two, when the weather was better, we would come back, hale and hearty, and recover the jeep.

It was a reasonable proposal, but he paid no attention to it. He went on telling me what he was thinking, as if I had not interrupted him at all. The food we had in our knapsacks would be enough for one day more. If on the second day the weather continued to be bad and snowy, he would climb up alone to Lukitė. There he would take a horse-driven sleigh, load it with food and borrow a sheepskin coat and two shovels. If he started out from here at dawn, late in the afternoon of the following day he would be back again. Thus he hoped to be able to open up the road for my jeep — the ruts of the sleigh and the two spades would be invaluable.

While I was thinking over his words, he squatted over his knapsack and pulled out a brown case with a double-barrelled gun folded in two in it.

'Now I'll go out for a while,' he said, 'and if I'm lucky I may hit something. In the meantime you'd do well to walk about the cabin a little: be careful not to let your feet freeze. Those shoes of yours....'

He took the gun and went out.

It was nearly noon. I went to the road and heard the ringing of bells which merrily announced to the world one unmistakeable thing — the arrival of a sleigh driven by a pair of horses.

I hurried on to the road. Snowflakes were flitting about in the dark.

Suddenly, the sleigh drawn by a pair of horses emerged out of the snow. As in the old fairy tales, the horses had nosegays woven of red yarn on their foreheads, and there was a man with a long moustache in a thick sheepskin coat with a fur cap on his head on the driver's seat. The sleigh itself was absolutely simple, a rough-made village sleigh, without iron runners. Another man sat huddled on a small pile of hay behind the driver. He too wore a sheepskin coat, which had a more modern and townish look. On his head he had a cap with earflaps, and his hands were thrust into huge fur gloves with only one finger.

When the driver called out to the horses, and pulled up the sleigh a few paces from me, the man with the earflapped cap raised his hand and greeted me in a friendly way, as if we were old acquaintances.

'You're Emilian's friend, aren't you?' he called out to me.

His face was ruddy, youthfully cheerful and fresh for his rather advanced age.

I nodded. He bestirred himself, raised the skirts of his sheepskin coat and jumped out of the sleigh.

'Glad to meet you!' he said, offering me his hand.

We began to smoke, holding the cigarettes in our cupped hands to prevent them from being wetted by the snow. His name was Ivanaki Stefchov, and he was the district doctor in those parts. He had got an urgent call to Borovka village for a delivery and that was why he was on the road in that cursed weather. But it would not matter if all went well — the hardships connected with these sudden journeys were soon forgotten; a glass of hot brandy with a little honey in it was all that was needed! You sip it, your blood starts boiling in your veins and that's all there is to it! You forget the snow at once, and the snowstorm and all the cursed hardships. Only a feeling of warmth remains in your heart.... As for Emilian, he had known him for quite a long time — the last two and a half years, more or less....

'Is that so?' I asked in surprise. 'You are surely friends, then?'

He flipped the stub of his cigarette into the snow and shrugged his shoulders. It was as if a shadow passed over his face, which suddenly lost its sheerful expression, making him look several years older.

'Friends!' the doctor paused for a while, digging into the snow with his boot and smiling with a certain restraint. Restrained, his smile was also not at all gay. It was not sad either. It was rather a smile expressing bewilderment, disillusionment, revealing the profoundly affected feelings of a good man.

'Friends!' he repeated. 'When two men, my dear sir, have spent not one or two days but months and months under the same roof, and when there wasn't a night that they weren't together, when they often drank their beer in each other's company and boiled their coffee on the same spirit-lamp, and when they frequently discussed all sorts of questions big and small far into the night; I say, when two such people meet and then once again meet, not two but even twenty years later, they meet as friends, shake hands in a friendly way, and however busy and in whatever hurry they may be in, they always manage to spare an hour for a chat to recall old times. He and I lived in the same flat, then I left to specialize, our ways parted and we lost sight of each other. And it so happened today that we met again, after such a long time, over there, behind the valley, where the road enters the forest. You are his friend, and that is why I am telling you all these things, because the same thing may happen to you some day. The same thing will surely happen, bear that in mind. He shook my hand, but did it as if we had only just got to know each other. And he lost no time in warning me that he was lying in wait for a hare, making me realize that I was to make myself scarce and not linger overduly with him. I invited him to drop in at my place in Lukité, but he waved his hand in an indefinite kind of way, saying he was with a friend whom he had to take somewhere, perhaps to Lukité, so if he had time . . . he was in a great hurry . . . . We had a cigarette together and parted. You asked me whether we were friends. Well, I am his friend and I like him all right, but after all, is that the way to meet a friend?'

The doctor buttoned up his sheepskin coat and looked at the sleigh. The sleigh and the horses and the man in the driver's seat, all looked as if they were entangled in the white network of snow that went on falling softly from the dark sky.

'It was only yesterday that I got to know him,' I said. As the doctor was silent, I added: 'He seems to be an interesting chap.'

'Oh, come on!' the doctor said curtly. 'Come and see me in Lukité and I'll tell you a few things about him. He is one of those specimens that you can never tell in what colour they're painted, whether they're good or bad, or how good, or how bad they are. But if you happen to meet them and come to know them more closely, they somehow win you over, you like them and you go on liking them and carry them in your heart all your life. Come and stay with me in Lukité — why should you be in such a hurry in this weather? Wait for the snow to stop falling and the roads to get opened up, and then go on with your trip. I'll entertain you properly, be sure of that, for I haven't had a guest for a very long time. And I'll tell you a lot of interesting things about our friend.'

He gave me his hand. His face had an eager look and was no longer darkened by that shadow. He even patted me on the shoulder and advised me not to stay out alone in the open, but to go into the cabin and stay there under shelter and warm by the fire until Emilian came back.

'And don't tell him we spoke about him,' he warned me on leaving.

I looked after the sleigh until it disappeared from my sight. Soft, downy snow was falling gently as far as the eye could see.

CHAPTER TWO

After that everything went pretty much as Emilian had foreseen it.

On the second day at dusk we arrived at Lukité. We took the sleigh to the co-operative farm and expressed our warm thanks to the chairman. Then, when we were alone, Emilian took his knapsack out of the jeep, slung it over his shoulder and offered me his hand.

I looked at him in amazement.

'Didn't you say we were going to spend the night together at the doctor's?' I asked.

He squeezed my hand so warmly and so hard that my face twisted in a frown.

'You'll have to spend the night at the doctor's alone,' he replied. 'I have to go back, back to Baloutin village. There is a mine at Baloutin village, and I have to be there at the mine for a day or two.'

'And then?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Well that's that! Thanks, anyway!' I said, swallowing hard.

'Oh, that's all right! Not worth mentioning!' he said. Then he paused and added coldly: 'Don't imagine that I made the trip just for your sake. I'm not at all given to sentimentality! I just decided I'd make a trip and that was all .... I like travelling about these places.'

We stood in the open, the wind lashing our faces.

'You could wait until tomorrow morning,' I said, adding that, according to me, it was not very wise for a man to travel alone in the mountains on such a winter night.

'Who told you I'm travelling alone?' Emilian smiled in his reserved way. 'A lorry is setting out from the village council building for the forestry at Rahnevo. It will pass two miles from Baloutin. I fixed up everything early this morning, so you needn't worry about me. Precision is my motto.'

You could at least leave me your address,' I said. Then I added quickly: 'You know I drew some sketches. When the portrait is ready, I would like you to see it.'

He fastened the straps of his knapsack and again gave me his hand.

'I'll surely find you in Sofia,' he said. 'Now, so long! And don't go out on any more trips with your fine towny shoes.'

He took a few steps and then turned round:

'Don't forget to let the water out of the radiator. The other night I did it.'

'I shan't forget!' I whispered.

And then I saw him no more.

Doctor Ivanaki Stefchov lived at the end of the village, in a new brick house that had come, like a rare swallow, ushering in the new times in this kingdom of stone and wood. The house had been erected the year before by Sali Saidov, shift leader at the mine near Baloutin village. Sali Saidov was a go-ahead, capable fellow, who had made a good pile of money in less than two years, got married to the daughter of the Baloutin Party secretary and gone to live in the big stone house of his prominent father-in-law. His mother, a buxom woman of forty-five who was as strong as the age-old pines and who, according to her neighbours, had been a widow since time immemorial, remained in the brick house. (Some twenty years ago wolves had killed her husband somewhere round about the terrible region of Zmeitsa). It was to this brick house with its tile roof, brazenly young and pretty among its aged grey stone sisters, that Doctor Ivanaki brought his bachelor belongings — two trunks and a bundle of medical magazines and pamphlets. He rented the upper floor with the balcony and the verandah, while Sali's mother remained on the ground floor, where she felt more comfortable, because on this floor Sali had built a lovely fountain with two shining brass taps and a spacious sink, lined with enameled tiles, so wonderfully beautiful that you thought it a sin to touch them with your hand....

Sali no longer professed the faith of his ancestors; it was just the same to him whose face would be reflected in the red enamel, one of his own family, or that of a stranger. What else could you expect of him, the infidel? Nasty looks were fixed on his wife's face, on her shoulders, on her white neck, which the wanton woman used to bare down to the curve of her breasts in the summer time, but Sali did not fly into a rage, the blood did not boil in his veins, his right hand did not reach for the handle of the butcher's knife that was tucked into his sash. Oh, he did not wear a sash, the renegade, and had no taste for knives. But old Fatmé still observed the customs of her ancestors, and that is why, although she, too, had long ago taken off the yashmak, she nevertheless still endeavoured to guard the red tiles above the sink — this holy of holies in her house — from other people's hands and eyes.

She tried to guard this beautiful sink, and yet not so assiduously as she would have done, say ten years before. Ten years before she would never have thought that it was possible to go unveiled beyond the stone wall of her widowed home. And now she not only walked along the village streets without the cursed veil of her grandmother and great-grandmothers, but would often lay the table for Ivanaki, and even eat and stay with him while he would have another drink of brandy from the glazed mug of her late husband who had fallen a prey to the wolves....

Such is the way of the world, as the saying goes. And I learned all these things from Ivanaki who was turned fifty, but was gay and youthful and did not try to conceal his love for the harmless little pleasures of life.

Fatmé boiled a chicken for us and then carefully fried it in fresh butter. The co-operative farm at Lukité village had a large herd of cows and its own dairy, and that is why the farmers were able to vary and supplement their food with delicious white cheese and butter, which melted like froth in their saucepans, smoked on the outside from the open fires. Such melting butter filled the kitchens with a delectable appetizing smell and it was in such butter that the sprightly Fatmé fried the delicious chicken which she had got ready for us.

Then, after we had had our dinner, Ivanaki took me to his room. A square cast iron stove was burning pleasantly and the air was filled with the fragrance of pine and tar. The doctor invited me to stretch myself out on his bed, while he sat by the stove, after he had stoked it up with pieces of wood. Then he started slowly filling his big Bavarian pipe with fine-cut tobacco. We spoke a little about the way in which the inhabitants of Lukité village made their livings — many of the young men had left the village to go and work in the mines, and many of them never came back but got married to girls in neighbouring villages and stayed there to live. The others were all in the timber industry, working at the state forestries, or as shepherds and cowherds, and, in summer, as mowers and hay carters. The little tilling that had to be done, was done by the women. The women also worked on the cow farm as milkmaids and cattle-breeders, made cheese, churned butter at the dairy, wove rugs in winter, brought forth and raised their own children.

That is what Ivanaki was telling me, as he puffed out clouds of smoke from his pipe. While listening to him, in my mind's eye I saw my beloved village of Kesten, only as big as the palm of your hand, so to say, and as old as the world, with its houses and courtyards gradually being deserted, because of the above-mentioned profitable mines to which the men were attracted by the high wages and the enticements of a new urbanized way of life; Kesten village, which was hidden away in the folds of the mountains, with a lot of cattle and farm animals and with insufficient farm hands. And who knows why, the same old picture kept emerging in my imagination: the little spruce copse and the valley overgrown with trees, and the meadow above the valley where a slender-legged and high-thighed girl ran after a flock of wilful goats. Sometimes when you listen to a story, something quite different keeps crossing your mind'e eye — so perverse is human nature. Especially when the night outside is a 'wolves' night', and inside a huge fire is roaring in the red-hot stove.

'The old is vanishing,' the doctor said, 'it is vanishing never to return, thank God.' A note of peculiar malice had crept into his voice, as if he were interested in stamping out the old from the face of the earth as soon as possible. 'In a decade or two,' he went on, 'the new industrial centres will have sapped almost all the blood of these out-of-the-way little villages. Only the cow farms and dairies will remain here. Diesel engines will replace the mules. Only the old people will remember these stone cabins, while their sons and daughters will be living in housing blocks made of brick and concrete. And doctors will not be jolted about in outdated sleighs along roads blocked up with snowdrifts, but will travel with helicopters — from the industrial centre to the cow farms and back....'

That was how he spoke, scornful of the outdated things of the present and eagerly dreaming of the near future of brick and concrete and of helicopters in which doctors would be able to travel from place to place to their patients. Ivanaki had specialized abroad, was getting on in years, liked ease and comfort and so his eagerness for the near future of brick and concrete was explicable and natural.

As for myself... well, I listened to him and felt sorry and a little sad, though I quite agreed in principle with him. It was just that I simply could not bring myself to admire helicopters. I prefer the old shelves of our ancestors to the modern white cupboards, and that's that. Honestly, I would not exchange the pleasure of chopping my own wood and kindling a big fire in the fireplace for any electric radiator. And as for the sleighs, Ivanaki was quite wrong. How could you compare the terrible roar of a propeller with the silvery jingling of bells; or the soft gliding of the sleigh with the mad flight at three hundred kilometres an hour? And why this speed, if I may ask? Speed is necessary when you have to overcome great distances. But the road from Dospat to Teshel is quite short and you need no helicopter for it. Travelling, that is flying in Ivanaki's helicopter, you would neither hear the whispering of the snow, nor see it shimmering, and, on sunny days, you would not be able to feast your eyes on the view of the snow-capped, snow-decked pines. But that is not all, wait a minute. What about that peaceful gentle slumber that closes your eyes like a lullaby after listening for some time to the sound of horses softly trotting in the snow! Tell me, can there be sleep more wonderful? And what if the day is not sunny, and the snow is falling thick from the overcast sky, and around you all is quiet, deserted and wild? Then you offer a cigarette to the man sitting in the driver's seat in front of you and talk to him about various trifling things, while in your mind's eye you see ragged wolves with burning eyes and other horrible apparitions; so you often ask the man in the driver's seat whether he has not happened to miss the right road, and whether you will soon be at the village to which you are travelling. If you were to fly in a helicopter, you would never think of asking such questions.

That is why I felt a little sad while listening to Ivanaki's words about the near future. That future will be wonderful, of course, with its buildings of concrete and plastics, and its wide asphalted trunk roads and its helicopters. But what about that spruce copse in the valley, overgrown with trees? It will surely be transformed into a corner of a big park. And the sleighs? No one will remember them. People will be sleeping on pneumatic mattresses and in their bedrooms they will have crystal clear air, chemically purified; and the climate they wish — with more or less moisture, according to their taste.... Well, good luck to them! I prefer to lie in the grass, looking at the sky and listening to the crickets.

After finishing this first, informative part of his monologue, the doctor once again filled his pipe, paused for a while and began, at long last, to tell me about Emilian.

'I got acquainted with that man in Sofia three years ago, when I was in charge of the department of internal medicine at the 37th City Polyclinic. I was to get an assignment abroad, an interesting, long assignment which would enable me to specialize in diseases of the bile and liver. That is why I was in high spirits, as is usually the case on the eve of such events; I looked on everything then with rose-coloured spectacles and found the world more beautiful than it was. I have always been an optimist, but at that moment, as they say, my optimism brimmed over. I had a suit made of a wonderful striped tweed and when I put it on in front of the mirror I thought I looked at least ten years younger. It was a pity that my head had gone bald, otherwise I had a pretty youthful look. Then still full of this fine festive mood, I joined some local courses for ball-room dancing lessons, not out of love for dancing, but just in case I needed it. If you're invited, say, to a New Year's ball, and a Fräulein smiles at you: "Bitte, Herr..." stretching out her hand towards you, and you stand there blushing with shame because you don't know a single dance. My optimism at that time really brimmed over. I patted my patients on the shoulders, assuring them that with such diseases as theirs people lived to be a hundred years; I went even further, promising an advanced old age to even the hopeless ones, whose hearts creaked like locomotives climbing up the Vladaya Hills, advising them to buy fishing rods and go out angling for pike.

'I assure you that if at that time a clever girl had offered me her hand, I would surely have married her. For, although I was an old bachelor, I wasn't all that old in years — I had hardly turned forty-six. I mean at that time when I got to know Emilian. I was in awfully high spirits. How could I know then that the "forthcoming" assignment which I had been promised, was, in those months, only in the stage of good intentions, a sapling in the files of the Ministry, exceedingly delicate and with a very uncertain future?

'Do you know Marin Drinov Street? It is a beautiful street, you surely know it! And the housing block at № 69 is the pearl in its crown. I had two rooms on the third floor of this housing block — a bedroom and a small consulting room. After working hours at the polyclinic, I had my private practice there and received patients three times a week. My patients were not numerous, but sometimes they did come. They were usually people whom I knew: friends of my friends, distant relatives or people living on the other floors of the housing block. Those who did not know me could hardly have found me, even if they wished to: the plate inscribed with my name was hung at the main entrance and was smaller than a lady's handkerchief.... Why you may ask me? Well, in the morning I had to look after my patients at the polyclinic, and in the afternoon see those who came to my home. And what about the afternoon nap, the newspapers, the glass of beer and the chats with friends? What about them? They were the reason I had hung up a very small plate at the main entrance, limiting my reception days to three and my reception hours from 4 to 6. I could have lived, of course, without any private practice, but there's always been, as it were, a thirst in me to be doing something, and not just anything, but something connected with my profession. My father was a watchmaker. When he got old, he retired from business, but put up a small working table in the kitchen and would spend a few hours there every day, like a spider in its cobweb. At times I suspected that he put our clocks out of order on purpose to repair them. The rest of his time, when he wasn't asleep or working in his cobweb, he spent at the nearby café, telling Armenian anecdotes or playing backgammon with the other pensioners.

'So, I kept two rooms — a bedroom and a consulting room. Opposite me in the same flat there lived a plump old lady with her niece, a chemist at the Aroma Perfumery Enterprise. They used the kitchen of the flat, which I hardly ever entered, because I had a washbasin in my consulting room and a tap. The aunt was a gay old lady, with two ruling passions: making pancakes and frying potatoes in fresh butter. And when she was doing neither the one nor the other, she whiled away the hours knitting sweaters or doing lacework, or would tell her own fortune with a pack of cards. As for the niece, let me tell you, she was a charming girl, an absolute dream. She had fine legs, a slender waist and a well-rounded bust. I am ready to bet you a case of beer that if you saw such a woman you'd positively long to paint her portrait. But if you did happen to meet her, she would certainly refuse to let you paint her — I am ready to stake two cases of beer to one empty bottle, that she'd most unceremoniously turn down your request. Though at first glance, owing to her curved lips and whimsical little chin she looked frivolous, her behaviour was, on the contrary, very serious and she always looked at me with stern, earnest eyes. "Comrade doctor, comrade doctor," she called me, addressing me always in the polite Bulgarian form of 'you'. "Tanichka" (her name was Stanka), Tanichka," I always tried to break the ice between us when I felt bored, "come to my consulting room and let us have a chat about chemistry." "No, thank you" she would say, rejecting my proposal, smiling in her ice-cold way. "What to you know about industrial chemistry, anyway?"

'I was forty-six years old. At that age, bachelors like me get set in their habits and customs. It would have been difficult for me, for instance, to give up my two-hour afternoon nap, or my glass of beer at the local restaurant in the evening. I would hardly have liked to exchange the Saturday bridge party for any other entertainment. But I must confess that at that time I was ready to give up half these things, if she... you know what I mean, don't you? Of course, it goes without saying. I was ready to marry her and that was that. For the first time in my life — selflessly and without any hesitation.

'And I persisted in this aim; how I persisted in it, old fool that I was! When we happened to be alone for a minute or two in the lounge, I would start pecking, from a distance, at the subject of marriage, while the temperature in her eyes would fall below zero. I would be pecking and hinting cautiously... from a distance, and she would stare at me with her stern eyes, hardly forbearing to stamp her feet and shoo me away. Or she would cut me short and start talking about her industrial enterprise — how they had introduced who knows what into production and expected good results in this or that, and how she had made this or that proposal to the chief technologist, and he, the chief technologist.... And so on and so forth, all along the same line....

'That is how things stood between us, when Emilian appeared on the scene.

'He appeared like a William the Conqueror in all the splendour of his youth, with the self-confidence of a man who had set out to discover new worlds. He came as yet another inmate of our flat, to live in the fourth room of the apartment in which we were living.

'There was nothing unusual in it, because his room as well as the flat and the entire housing block were under the jurisdiction of the Housing Committee of the District Council and it was this Committee which had given him the necessary document, entitling him to occupy the room. In this Emilian was not to blame at all. He had never seen the room before, even in his dreams, and did not know the girl.

'I like young people, but Emilian did not gladden my eye — he looked to me somehow too perfectly modelled. As soon as I saw him, I felt a strange anxiety in my heart and was sorry that he had appeared among us. My instinct told me that something disagreeable and irreparable was going to happen, and I was not wrong.

'The aunt had been the first to meet him that day, and we had already learned from her that he was a geologist, working at the Geological Research Institute, and that he had a microscope and other instruments on his desk, while his bed was a folding one, of the military type. In the evening he came to us in the hall, and shook my hand hard but hardly cast a glance at me, whereas he acted in just the opposite way with the chemist: he barely touched her hand but cast a long look at her. You surely know how penetrating his eyes can be. Then he asked me whether we were in the habit of chatting that way in the lounge in the evenings, and I replied in the affirmative, although that was not precisely the truth. He frowned a little then and told us, without beating about the bush, that it would be better if we did not chat in the lounge, at least for some time, because he had some extra work to do and the noise would disturb him and hinder his work. I was about to tell him that a lounge was meant to be a lounge, where people could gather and chat in the evening, but the chemist suddenly took the wind out of my sail. "Don't worry," she said, "we shan't interfere with your work." She made the statement, as if on my behalf, too, without having got my consent. I kept quiet, because I found it awkward to start arguing with her in the presence of a third party. But even if the third party had not been present I would have kept quiet in the name of concord! Concord and a good mood, a good mood in company — is something like ozone on everyday life. „Yes," I said, "if you have so much to do, we won't interfere with your work, of course." I expected him to say at least "thank you", but he seemed not to have heard me. Or maybe he thought that, as a matter of course, we were all supposed to walk on tiptoe, to whisper in each other's ears whatever we had to say to each other, or mimic to each other like the deaf and dumb. Anyhow, he said nothing whereas my chemist started to chatter, and twenty to the dozen! In just a minute or two she managed to inform him that she was working as laboratory assistant at the Aroma factory. That in their shop.... "Was it Aroma you said?" Emilian suddenly interrupted her, sinking back into his thoughts. Then he asked quite unexpectedly, whom the chairs in the hall belonged to, whose round table it was and who cleaned and tidied up the lounge. I started explaining to him that the chairs were mine and would have continued along the same line, but he began softly whistling a song to himself, then got up and went to look at a lithograph of a Spanish girl, with a jug on her head. The lithograph was very beautiful and I cut short my explanations about the chairs to let him examine it at leisure. This lithograph, too, was mine. I had got it as a present on a St. John's Day, but I did not remember from whom. Its frame was bronzed and glistened like gold.

'So he went to examine the lithograph more closely and that pleased me. Well, I said to myself, "Let my lady chemist see that I am not ignorant of the arts and that people value my pictures." And while he was looking at the lithograph I promised to myself that I would buy one more picture.

Then he turned round, scrutinizing me from head to toe with a critical glance, and asked me in a cool voice whether I was a specialist in internal diseases. "Yes, I'm a specialist in internal medicine," I nodded. "That's what I expected to hear," he laughed. "Why, if I may ask?" He did not answer my question directly, but laughed again with his shattering, derisive laughter, which you must already have had the pleasure of hearing. A strange laugh! Derisive, but it does not hurt you, thunderous, without being rude. You feel squashed, that you are being shaken, yet you bear him no malice. You only feel a bit sad.... And not because you are being laughed at, but because you haven't got the power and cannot laugh in the same way.... Then he belched forth a spate of invective against internal medicine. It was the most hopeless branch of medicine, and I should not even argue the point. It was quite obvious! Take, for instance, one of the most trifling things, such as a cold in the head. Well, what have you got to say? And what about rheumatism and ulcers, let alone severe heart diseases, cirrhosis, cancer and so on. Doctors didn't know anything but coffenal and sulphamides for them. Oh, he begged my pardon. He had forgotten antibiotics. And what of the future? The physicists, he said "have penetrated the world of the atom, discovered particles in it with opposite charges and are on the way to finding an anti-substance and revealing the secret of original matter, whereas you, specialists in internal medicine are still unable to cope with a simple sneeze. That's how you are!"

'He stopped in the centre of the lounge, casting a glance at me that was anything but friendly: "People are already flying in spaceships, while your knowledge is still in the wooden wheel stage." "I beg your pardon!" I replied. "You are barking up the wrong tree in heaping your reproaches on me. I am neither a creator nor an investigator, as a matter of fact, I am not a scientist at all, but only a modest doctor in internal medicine. It is neither within my possibilities nor is it my business to discover a remedy for cancer!" He cast such a crushingly pitying glance at me, that I felt cold shivers run down my spine, although the weather was close, for it was at the beginning of July, if I remember right. "So," he said. "You're nothing but a 'modest' doctor. In other words, like a Pontius Pilate you're washing your hands, your excuse for your doctor's overalls. Let the professors and scientists think about people's health. We, the modest ones, will patch things up, somehow, with whatever happens to be handy. And anyway, we'll live in peace: after working hours we'll pay social visits with our wives or drink beer with our friends at modern restaurants or play cards somewhere until it's time to turn in. Wonderful!" And he ended with his characteristic malicious smile, which you're surely familiar with: "Just in the style of our epoch, isn't it?" In other words, I was a phenomenon alien to the style of our times and to modern life.

'I don't know what he meant by "the style of our epoch". But in my opinion in all epochs, past and future, there will be investigators and practitioners, men who make discoveries and men who put their discoveries into practice. As to beer and cards, I never found nor do I find now anything wrong in them, provided you don't overindulge. If you don't go too far, why shouldn't you drink beer or play cards? And why shouldn't you visit your friends? If there is anything here in Lukitė that gets me down, it is the fact that the families that I can visit can be counted on the fingers of one hand. And that's why I am waiting with impatience for the day when the county hospital will be opened, so that I can get a job there as a specialist. In the county town I'll make friends with at least ten families. I'll satisfy my thirst for lager beer and will surely get married. Let Emilian go on saying that it isn't in the style of the epoch .... O yes, as I was saying, that evening I felt rattled and decided to get up and withdraw to my consulting room. I looked at my chemist to wink to her not to listen to any further talk of that man's, because I was sure that she, too, must have been hurt by his not too well-considered words.

'I looked across at her, and I must admit that I felt still more hurt, because she was looking at the man with adoring eyes, and half-parted lips, as you look, for instance, at a picture by a world-famous artist. I had seen such admiring glances at the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow. Young people are prone to assume such attitudes of admiration, and it is quite natural. You've seen a picture in the magazines, you've heard people talk about it, and all of a sudden — there it is, the very thing, in front of you! You may admire it, of course, especially if you're emotional by nature. But this geologist was no such picture — he was a living man, made of flesh and blood. Moreover, he was a newcomer in our flat and his speech was tactless and pretty rude for a newcomer. Yet, she was looking at him with admiration .... And I didn't get up from my chair, I don't know, even now, why.

'Then he came up to me, putting his hand on my shoulder. His face had suddenly become good-natured and friendly, he was watching me with a beautiful smile, which could make amends for anything, even for the deepest mortification and the most insulting of words. I felt at that moment that I bore him no grudge, and that I would never be able to bear a grudge against him. Such an inexplicable feeling rose in my heart .... And I must tell you that that feeling has not left me, even up to now. I am no dreamy romanticist, nor an oversensitive specimen, not at all. I don't suffer from painful oversensitiveness, because in my twenty years of practice I have met all kinds of people, and have got accustomed to seeing all sorts of odd features in their character, good and bad. My heart, as they say, has formed a kind of defensive crust in this respect. But I felt at that moment, as that man stood, bent over me, I had a feeling that no good lay in store for me from that quarter: just imagine it — such a fatalistic premonition! And I knew in fact that that wasn't just the word for it — I knew somehow that he was going to rob me of something that was exceedingly precious, that he would cause me pain and that I should not bear him a grudge, but, on the contrary, I should open my heart to him and pardon him all, like one of the ancient Christians....

'This premonition, as you will see, didn't deceive me. Perhaps you think that that night he made a special effort to soften the effect of his words? Nothing of the kind! After asking me with an awfully kind smile if he hadn't by any chance hurt my feelings, he hastened to declare — even before hearing my answer — hastened to declare that he did not like people who did not carry marshals' batons in their knapsacks.... In other words, he included me, quite plainly and bluntly, in the category of people who were not striving for big things, who were deprived of strong passions and lofty ideals. He was telling me quite plainly, to my face, that according to him I belonged to that group of indifferent people whom he despised and who were of no use in the world. He was telling me this to my face and in the presence of a third party, asking me at the same time whether he hadn't by any chance hurt my feelings! Such was the specimen I was confronted with that night. Well, if I had been one of those "indifferent" people, in view of my pretty advanced age, I would surely not have looked forward so eagerly to my specialization. You can best form your own judgement. The extra pay that you get on your basic salary as a specialist is not very alluring. Besides, I'm not one of those eager to get hold of a lot of money. You can ask anyone you like in Lukité whether I take any fee and what fees I charge when somebody comes to be treated by me privately. The folks round here will tell you and they won't lie to you, because lying isn't held in esteem in these parts. So you'll form your own judgement as

to whether I'm one of the "indifferent" ones and whether he was right in attacking me so insultingly in the presence of a third party.

'It is about that third party that I wish to tell you a few words: Emilian robbed me of that third party on the very first night of our acquaintance. But in all fairness I must say that he made no special effort to please her or to make himself liked by her. He neither tried to make a good impression on her, nor paid court to her, nor did he endeavour in any way to shine. That very first night, I'd say, he manifested one of his very repulsive features. He spoke to us, but seemed hardly to notice us — as if we were nothing to him but a pretext, an outside impulse, an inducement to express his thoughts, to reason and to argue. I was a specialist in internal medicine, very well: this gave him the opportunity of coming out with a spate of bitter discourse and invective against the backwardness of internal medicine. I did not do any research work, did not discover harmful viruses and find means of protection against them. So much the worse for me! I was an element alien to our epoch, an indifferent lazybones. He always criticized me, always crushed me with his sarcasm in the name of human welfare, while it never occurred to him to cast a more humane glance at yours truly, to listen to what I might have to say, to understand what I was doing, in a word to understand me as one man should understand another.

'Such a type can provoke, to put it mildly, nothing but consternation. He can arouse any feeling but not sympathy. It was very natural for us to lock him as far as possible out of our hearts, and to treat him with proper coolness. Yet, something very peculiar happened, maybe just the opposite to what should have happened. Even now I don't know why. It just happened, explain it in any way you wish. Despite the bitterness which his words evoked in my heart, I didn't resent what he said but, incredible as it may seem, I felt a kind of friendship springing up in my soul, in a word, this unbridled man began to win my sympathy. Whether there is or isn't any logic in the matter I do not know, but that is what actually happened.

'I have often listened to the inspired speeches of other people on a number of controversial topics, such as the welfare of mankind, for instance, happiness, duty and the like. I approved of their speeches in my heart, but they did not move me. Our Emilian did not speak with enthusiasm, did not get excited, did not select any fine words, because in his speech he was as strong and daring as a bull fighter, believing in what he said like a fanatical prophet, self-confident to excess and handsome in his manliness! Who knows! Maybe it was these things that won over our hearts and made us accept him as a friend, although he did not take too much notice of us and was not particularly interested in us. I, too, accepted him with an open heart, although he ridiculed me, placing me, in the most categorical way, in my place on the dunghill of indifferent people, useless people who did not live in harmony with the "style of our epoch."

'Well, the question was about the third party, about my chemist. It seems to me that she got infatuated with him that very first night. I told you he did nothing to win her favour. But she was infatuated, and a few days later was, as they say, head over heels in love with him. The symptoms of her love sickness were so obvious that I felt awkward when I met her and had to talk to her. Her attitude towards me, even before this happened, had been cool, but now I seemed to be nothing but empty space for her. And when she couldn't help taking notice of me, because after all we lived in the same flat, I saw a certain animosity in her eyes. I had done her no harm, and I wanted nothing from her. Neither had I any intention of reproving her and making a nuisance of myself. Why then should she look at me with such hostile eyes?

'And he? You might well ask me what his attitude was? I told you already that he did not seek her love. Nor did he pretend to be in love. Men who are in love bring flowers to their beloved, give her small presents, take her to the theatre, the cinema or just for a walk in the park. I, for instance, felt like doing all these things. And I did them, but only in my mind, in my

imagination. In fact, I did nothing, because I was afraid of falling into the pitiful and ridiculous position of an intruder, into the position of a man who offers his heart without the slightest grounds for being encouraged to reveal the love in it. That is why I did not bring flowers to my chemist, nor did I take her for any walks. As for Emilian, I'm quite sure that he didn't do any of these things even in his imagination. Not because he was averse to them by nature — for he was a genuine and perfect embodiment of vitality. If the energy boiling in him could have been transformed into sound, it would have roared like a waterfall; if it could have been transformed into light it would have glared like those gaily-coloured fireworks, which are shot into the sky in the evenings of great holidays. But he simply showed no interest in my chemist, his heart was closed to her with a thousand locks.

'His heart was locked to her, but that did not prevent him from kindly opening the door of his room for her to go in and from returning her kisses when she embraced him. You may ask me how I happened to know this? I knew it, because sometimes she would do these things in my presence on purpose, with a kind of cruel and demonstrative premeditation. With a face, gentle and delicate, a face to which rudeness and cruelty were organically alien, she would thrust herself into his arms in my presence, laughing so as to make me feel the peculiar character of her laughter. I think that she felt an irresistible urge to show her love, and therefore did not hide it from me. He paid no attention to this love game: he was invited to take part in it, and he did. Why should he hide himself? The chemist and I were for him pretexts for witty conversations, pretexts for expressing original thoughts, sometimes even pretexts for play. It was as though he were taking his breath or drinking a glass of cold water before joining the big chain dance.

'He did not like to talk about his own affairs, but we had heard something about his having undertaken a responsible and rather tough task in mining and geological research, and we knew that he had had differences with prominent people, specialists like himself. What the task was and what the differences of opinion were, I did not know, nor could I find out, because the path of my life neither crossed nor met that of the geologists. It was obvious, however, that he was wholly absorbed in his work and that in it he was just the same man as he showed himself to us— with a "marshal's baton" in his knapsack, marching on with great strides and despising those who were indifferent to work, always frank and rude.

'What could my chemist expect of such a man? Serious relations? A proposal of marriage? Anyhow, I foresaw the unhappy end of this drama, which was not late in coming. It came at the happiest, I would say at the merriest moment in their game of love. It was the time of that peculiar laughter which I spoke about a little while ago. Only three months had passed since our first evening together. Only three months for them, but you can well imagine, these three months were like three whole years for me.

'It was a Saturday afternoon — the most hateful and boring of afternoons! I took a nap and then decided to roam about the streets for a while, looking at the shop windows and killing time until the hour came at which I took my customary evening glass of beer. I opened the door to the lounge and a wave of her laughter struck me in the face, like a wave of boiling water. She nestled against his shoulder, laughing and looking shamelessly at me, and I knew very well that behind the door across the lounge her aunt was sitting with her lacework and listening in with approval, for, of course, she was expecting a wedding in the near future. It seemed to me all too vulgar, and I hastened to sneak out, pretending I was hard pressed for time.

'"Doctor," Emilian called out behind me, "wait just for a second, we can go out together!"

'My hand froze on the door knob. If it was a matter of seconds, I could wait for him, of course.

'And then the thing which I had always thought inevitable happened.

'"Where shall I see you tonight?" she asked, her eyes not looking at him, but fixed on me.

'"Wherever you say," Emilian shrugged his shoulders. He was in his element with big problems, he avoided thinking of trifles. The street and the place where they would meet were trifling things for him.

'"Wait for me at the entrance to our factory," she said. It was obvious that she was insisting on being seen with him by her colleagues.

'He nodded an "all right" and made for the door. But when he came abreast of me, he suddenly turned round.

'"Which is your factory?" he asked.

'He asked his question quite calmly, casually, as if he were asking the waitress at the café: "Are your cakes fresh?" At first glance there was nothing peculiar in his question. But my chemist started, shrank back with her hand pressed to her chest, on the verge of crying out. She stood thus with her lips half-parted and a dazed look on her face. But she did not cry out, only held her hand pressed hard to her breast, her fingers convulsively opening and closing. I tell you that something stabbed me in the heart then — I felt so sorry for her, although she treated me like an absolute stranger.

'"Which is your factory?" Emilian repeated. There was both surprise and irritation in his voice. He was angry at being detained by her and surprised at her silence.

'Yet, she had told him at least a hundred times that she worked at the Aroma in such and such a shop, and that of late Aroma had turned out such and such articles, and that the technologist at Aroma had said this or that about a proposal made by her, and so on and so forth. Had he been as absent-minded as a thousand professors, rolled into one, had his memory been no bigger than a match box, he should have remembered that she was working at the well-known Aroma, a factory unique of its kind.

'But he had never displayed any sign of absentmindedness, and his memory, according to me, did not fall far short of that which a thousand professors, rolled into one, would have displayed. In his room he had samples of more than one hundred kinds of minerals, a geological atlas of a thousand pages, comparative tables with at least five hundred titles, and I can tell you he worked irreproachably with all these things. He knew perfectly well which title was on which page, which index in that section, what mineral was tucked away in which place and in what piece of paper it was wrapped up. From where did I know these things? My dear fellow, during the hours which we spent together we discussed mainly geological subjects, and ninety-nine per cent of whatever was said on these subjects was said by him. The remaining one per cent was divided between us — two thirds for him and one third for me. This one per cent, again on his initiative, we usually set apart for the "marshal's baton", so that he could let loose his Philippic against those dead souls like myself, who were frittering away their time and leading a miserable, insignificant existence. What I meant to say was that I had seen with my own eyes how dexterously and faultlessly he manipulated his tables and exhibits. I think that this proved that his memory was quite all right.

'He had been endowed with a wonderful memory, of course, but it turned out that he did not remember anything that he had been told, time and time again, at least a dozen times. And not just by anyone, but by the girl whom he was kissing. My chemist had her shortcomings, of course, but as a worker and a woman she had many good features. She loved her profession, and was fervid about it, and in this respect was very much like Emilian. "Today I did this, the other day — that, and I've been thinking about an experiment, you have no idea how interesting it is!" She had got a prize for her excellent work, and they had even elected her to membership of the Party bureau. She wore her high-heeled shoes, too, but she was a real modest girl otherwise: I never saw her wear one of the modern skirts with a slit, or one of those that showed all her knees when she was sitting. I must tell you that I don't think very highly of the women who wear such skirts. I would not marry a woman who showed her knees in that way.

'What I meant to say was that he should never have forgotten the name of Aroma. He could have forgotten many other things, but he ought not to have let that name slip his memory, if for no other reason, then at least out of respect for the girl!

'So she stood there with her hands pressed to her breast as if she were unable to breathe. She seemed about to faint and collapse onto the carpet. I dashed across to her, asked her what the matter was, moved a chair nearer for her to sit down on. I knew perfectly well what the matter was, but played the naive. It was better that she should think me a fool than that I should let her realize that I was aware of the humiliating position in which her beloved had placed her.

'But she did not touch the chair. She said: "Go, please!" taking her hand quickly away from her breast. It seemed that she had recovered a little. She had regained her self-control and she stood erect, somehow unnaturally erect. There was something rigid and frozen in her figure. The muscles of her body were tense and strung, like the strings of a musical instrument.

'All this happened in a few seconds, no more. Then she shrugged her shoulders, her lips twisted in a painful smile, her eyelids fell over her eyes as if to protect them from some dazzling light.

'She jerked up her head and went to her aunt, without uttering a word.

'I was shocked, I wanted to say something very rude in very strong language to that fellow standing at the door, but I didn't know what. The most opprobrious words looked insignificant and feeble to express what I felt.

'He, however, only smiled his customary, condescendingly ironical smile, shrugged his shoulders, and said: "These women's whims! She'll get over it all right." Then he opened the door and kindly held it open for me to go out.

'For a while we walked in silence.

'"Doctor," he asked, bending a little to look into my face, "do you think she was really offended?"

'"That was a most terrible insult," I retorted.

'Emilian lit a cigarette and was silent for a moment.

'"Even now I can't think of that idiotic name," he sighed.

'"Aroma," I said.

'"Aroma," he repeated. "It is surely derived from aroma, fragrance."

'"Look here," I said as I stopped and took hold of him by the elbow. "Do you love that woman?"

'He looked at me surprised but attentive, as if trying to make out whether I was serious or jesting.

'"Do you love her or are you just playing at love?" I repeated.

'Evil little flames shone in his eyes, then died out at once.

'"Doctor," he said, "if you can diagnose my feelings. I'll be the most grateful patient that you ever had so far or that will ever cross your threshold in future."

'He took me by the arm, dragging me to one of the empty benches in the Doctors Garden, for we had stopped just in front of its entrance in Oborishté Street.

'We sat down, I lit a cigarette, and he went on talking.

'"Because, if you want to know, in this case I'm neither in love, nor am I playing at love. In the poor, limited world that is your knowledge and your life, things seem to be arranged in strict and clearly defined categories. For you there is either love or play. Thirty-six degrees and six-tenths centigrade are a symptom of health. One degree more arouses anxiety. And two degrees above the red line mean danger. According to you, if a man kisses a girl, he's either in love or a rascal. You measure man's conduct by your doctor's thermometer, but let me tell you that your thermometer is nothing but a liar. Because I can neither admit that I'm in love, nor that I'm a rascal. I kiss her without being in love and am still deeply convinced in my heart that I'm an honest fellow. And you cannot prove the opposite. I'm like a man, for instance, who has been invited to visit some people. The hostess offers cognac to the guest. Is the guest supposed to ask his hostess: 'Madam, are you giving me this cognac free of charge, or are you just loaning it to me?' Or is the hostess supposed to say to her guest: 'Sir, I'll treat you to a glass of cognac only on one condition — that you first swear that you love cognac!' You know perfectly well, doctor, that such questions are never asked: the hostess offers the glass of cognac, and the guest drinks it. That's all. She gave me to understand that she liked to be kissed by me, and I kissed her. There was no preliminary agreement between us. And now, you're asking me whether I love her or just play at love with her." He laughed merrily. "By the way, it is a typical question for a doctor of internal medicine to ask!"

'That was, my dear fellow, the way that man argued his case. He was sincere, believed in his system and with his cursed logic could prove that he was clearer even than rock-crystal.

'"Has it never occurred to you," I asked him, "that the girl may be in earnest about the whole affair? That her kisses were not 'glasses of cognac', but the expression of a pure and beautiful love?"

'He shrugged his shoulders.

"'Believe me or not, just as you choose, but that never occurred to me. I never stopped to think about it. It never occurred to me either that I ought to stop and think about it! Other things were stirring me at that time — I mean real emotions, but do get me right! Not sentimental rubbish." He contracted his eyebrows, his eyes shining provocatively and coldly like daggers from under his lashes. "And it was not about myself that I was thinking, doctor," he paused for a moment or two as if listening to something. "Not about myself," he repeated softly.

'That he had not been thinking about himself, I knew, was quite true. He was not one of those who gave much thought to their own personal comfort. He slept on an ordinary soldier's folding bed. He sat on a wooden chair. In his wardrobe he had only two or three suits. He did not go out in the evenings as would have been natural for a man of his age. He would chat for an hour or two with me or the chemist and would then sit down and work. And he worked on till midnight.

What a lot of rare books he had on his special subject, what instruments and what a collection of crystals! And his minerals? I've already told you about them. But as far as the so-called objects of pleasure and comfort were concerned, he was utterly poor. Compared with him, despite my modesty, I could be said to be well-off. At that time I had three suits in my wardrobe, two of which, black worsted ones, were quite dressy. I slept on a fine bed, though it was a bit old-fashioned, had a leather sofa, two leather settees and a solid and very impressive desk. I sold this furniture when I went to specialize, but at that time I still had it. Yet, there was no great difference in our incomes, because my patients were few and his salary was big, for he held a high post. What I meant to say was that he could have lived in a grander style, dressed better and had such furniture as was thought proper for a man in his position. He had the wherewithal for spending his evenings much more gaily than he did, either with friends going places or with a more intimate circle just going out for a drink. I tell you, in this respect he had possibilities at least three times greater than mine, because for one thing he was a lot younger, I must be at least ten years older than he is. All the advantages were on his side, yet he lived frugally and unpretentiously, and if it had not been for that affair with the chemist, I would even say that he lived like a Puritan. But that affair shows that he was far from being a Puritan. On the contrary, he was quite irresponsible and unscrupulous from the moral point of view. Yes, considering his possibilities, he lived very modestly, but when it came to money (the main thing) he was not modest at all. Just the opposite! When they started collecting voluntary contributions at the local Fatherland Front organization to equip the kindergarten, he alone gave almost as much money as all the other members of the organization put together. It was quite a handsome little sum! You might think that he did it to show off, so that people would say, "There, that's how a true communist should act," but that was hardly the case. He did not attend meetings, did not know the people in the district, was not interested in any of them and was not eager to get them interested in himself. But as soon as he heard about the kindergarten, he gave a substantial sum at once, amounting maybe to half his monthly salary.

'I knew that he led a frugal and modest life and that he was absorbed in his work and worries, and that is why I did not doubt his words when he said that his mind had been preoccupied with "other things" during those months and not with "sentimental rubbish" and that he had not given much thought to his own conduct. All right! But having been preoccupied with "other things" without having had time to think of his personal pleasures, did not give him the right to call his relations with the girl "sentimental rubbish", did not justify his utter indifference to the life of a woman whom he was wont to kiss. Both as a man and as a doctor I could not justify such indifference, even under the pretext of his having been preoccupied with other things, even with colossal worries.

'"All these months you've been acting like a cad," I told him. "You have hurt the girl and humiliated her in a most disgraceful way, and now you should make some sort of amends. You should try to excuse yourself by telling her that you were wool-gathering at the moment, or something like that."

'He got up, buttoned up his light woollen overcoat and then looked at me with such disdainful eyes that you would have thought I had just tried to persuade him to commit the most heinous crime a man was capable of.

'"You want me to lie," he protested, "to confess to guilt, which I am not aware of; to show feelings which I haven't got; to accuse myself of being absent-minded when I never was. In other words, you want me to pose as a deceitful, lying rascal. Do you know what you deserve for your advice?"

'You see what the outcome of it all was. From the accuser I became the accused! I had made such a mess of it all, that I simply did not know what to say to him.

'"Nevertheless you did hurt the girl's feelings," I sighed. I spoke softly and was deeply moved at the moment, because I felt genuinely sorry for her. But he suddenly burst out laughing, as often happened with him, and his laughter was so unexpectedly merry and good natured.

'"Doctor," he said, "you are a naive, good-hearted fellow, and that is why I can't take your words amiss. Your life is empty and aimless, your world is petty: you make a drama out of a few kisses, a great tragedy out of a foiled ambition. Go on living with this petty trade of yours, if it gives you satisfaction, but do not impose your stock in trade on others, learn to be tactful and sagacious. When people have decided to buy overcoats, you offer them shiny buttons. When they have decided to buy new shoes, you thrust shoe polish into their hands. This is very kind of you up to a certain point, but it is at the same time funny and regrettable. Petty trade is not in the style of our epoch."

'You see, he was comparing the girl's love to a button and the respect due to a human being to something like shoe polish.... The least one could say about him was that he was a queer fellow.

'You might say that he was not a queer fellow at all, but a cold and soulless creature. Don't hurry in adding him up! Don't label him as this or that! Let the pharmacists stick labels on their flasks, because every other sort of labelling is futile. Listen to what I'm going to say and you'll see that I'm right.

'Some fifty people lived in our housing block, but Emilian was not very closely acquainted with any of them. And he had no desire to get to know or make friends with anybody. When he met anybody on the stairs he would pass the time of day in a friendly enough way, but he never went beyond this perfunctory politeness. He didn't want to fraternize with our small world gathered in the four floors of the block, and that was that. You may think that he was a recluse, but see what follows!

'Right under the roof, there were two attic rooms inhabited by the family of a chauffeur from the State Automobile Service. He had a pretty little wife, and there were various rumours going round about her, and

I think that in this case the smoke was not without a fire. But that's of no importance, for she didn't play any great part in an episode that I wish to tell you about. Otherwise, she was attractive enough, nicely rounded, and had a pert tip-tilted nose to put the finishing touch to her. I said "finishing touch" because this tip-tilted nose of hers lent a provocatively frivolous expression to her face. Of course, her eyes, too, added to the frivolity of her expression, for her glance was, as they say, much too given to "roaming", more than was seemly for an earnest, respectable woman. But, let me tell you, what we call earnest respectability in women is a feature invented by husbands, who have some claims to owning their wives, and the whole idea is based on crass egoism. The husband wants his wife to be earnest and respectable to safeguard himself against unpleasant surprises, but prefers other women to be neither earnest, nor respectable in order to be able to have access to them. But that's another matter! Well, either because of her little nose or because of her eyes, this chauffeur's wife predisposed you to intimacy as soon as you saw her, and I think that this was good, because every intimacy in this world is accompanied by joy and other pleasant things.

'So, as I was saying, in the attic floor there lived a wife with her hasband, and this family had a son twelve years of age. Being a doctor, I was more closely acquainted with some of the families in our housing block, and can tell you with a clear conscience that there was more laughter and song in the small family of the chauffeur than in many of the families living on the lower floors.

'And then one night the son of the pert-nosed woman knocked at the door of our flat. "Is the geologist here?" He was a good-looking little lad, although awfully fat for his age. There was not a trace of his mother's frivolous expression in his face, although his eyes were black and wide-set like hers. He had an earnest, rather pompous air and the slightly funny look of a grown-up man twelve years old. It was just this that lent him his charm and attractiveness. And this charming kid asked whether the geologist was at home. I showed him into my consulting room. Emilian was boiling coffee for himself on my spirit lamp. "Comrade geologist," the boy said to him. In the piping voice of the little urchin there was not a note of confusion. It was obvious that he had inherited his mother's self-confidence. Emilian turned to him, and with a face that was the embodiment of indifference, asked softly: "What is it?" He did not even smile at him, did not encourage him even with a glance as grown-up people usually do when some youngster attempts to approach them. The boy stretched out his hand, opened his fist and on the palm of his hand we saw a little shining green stone as big as a hazelnut.

'In the same moment that the hidden stone appeared on the palm of the child's hand, I say, in the very same moment, the expression of indifference vanished from the face of our friend. If you have watched a strong wind at some time, chasing the clouds in the sky, you will have seen the sun sweeping away the shadows — just as instantaneously and with the same lightning speed Emilian's face lit up, revealing his soul; it became handsome and, believe me or not, it shone, as if radiating a soft, warm, velvety light. His eyes seemed to caress the boy before they smilingly came to rest on the green stone. Oh, what a smile, my dear fellow! If he had smiled so at the chemist during the halcyon days of their friendship, she would have easily swallowed the bitter pill which he served up to her later. She would have swallowed it and borne no malice! It was the smile of an Apollo who has suddenly discovered that the divine flame of immortality can be kindled, though only for a short time, in the hearts of ordinary human beings. You will pardon me if I use rather high-faluting words, mentioning Apollo and so on. I have nothing in common with this god of the arts, but I mentioned him, because you are an artist, quite familiar with his features, and you can therefore have a good idea of the smile I am talking about. At any rate, if I had been able to smile the way Emilian smiled with his eyes at that moment. I assure you most sincerely that not one chemist in the world would have been able to turn down my proposal of marriage. Because any one of them would have been aware of the fact that a spark of the fire that makes people look if not like Apollo, at least like an Aesculapius, was burning in my heart. I see that what I am telling you is nothing but empty talk, but the truth is that in his eyes I saw a smile that I had not seen in anyone before, either in my official or in my private practice. Neither had I seen such a smile among my friends over our glasses of beer in the evenings, when we used to talk about many, sometimes exceedingly strange, things.

'"Can that be a beryl?" the boy asked.

'Because mineral beryl looked just the same, greenish in hue, transparent and very light. The leader of their natural science study-circle, when he took them once to visit the crystalographic department of the museum, had pointed out an exhibit and said: "This is beryl ore. Berylium, the metal of the future, is extracted from it. It's the lightest of the light metals." They had asked him whether the future interplanetary stations would be built of this metal. He had replied that that was possible, but that beryl ore was a rare natural phenomenon, and that was why people would build the interplanetary space ports out of plastics, although beryl was preferable. "Yesterday they took us hiking to Mount Vitosha," the boy went on explaining, "and I found this little stone near a big rock. I said nothing about it, because our circle leader once mentioned this metal and said it was awfully important for aviation, and our Pioneer group leader once told me that aviation was a state secret. That is why I've come straight to you. I can take you to the exact spot where I found the stone. I've marked it with arrows."

'This episode started in my consulting room and ended in Emilian's room. I don't know whether the boy was disappointed when Emilian told him — very cautiously, of course — that his little stone was a coloured variety of quartz and that it had, therefore, nothing to do with and could have nothing to do with beryl. I told you that the boy was a charming little fellow — he was capable of mastering his feelings like a real man, being quite different from his mother in this respect.... So, I don't know whether he was disappointed with his stone, but he went home loaded with all kinds of minerals — there were yellow stones among them and green ones like emeralds, and blue ones and wonderful pink ones, which seemed to have absorbed the loveliest moment of the loveliest dawn. Emilian simply thrust them into his hands: "Take that too... and this one, and this!" Finally he also gave him a folding lens and a steel hammer to break sample pieces off larger stones and rocks.

'When the boy had gone, he looked at me with shining, triumfant eyes, and with the expression of a man who had proved to the whole world that he was a thinker, and that the whole world could go on living with faith in the future, because he, Emilian, would be thinking about it. I must confess that I am not at all versed in ancient history, but I think that a Caesar, for instance, in the great moments of his career as a dictator must have looked at the world in the same way.

'"Look," he said, making a gesture with his hand, "observe this boy more closely and then draw your own conclusions about yourself. All that is great and daring in our epoch is reflected, though in a naive, small way, in this boy. He lives with the ardour of an explorer, has the feeling of being a man who is doing something for society and is at the same time thinking with the consciousness of his class. He wants all that he is doing for society, for his own society, to be of lasting value. That is how the style of our epoch is reflected in this boy!" He took a few long strides up and down the room and then stopped again in front of me. "Whereas you, a grown-up man, a doctor of internal medicine, with your way of thinking and living, you will excuse me, are nothing but a relic. An archaeological find belonging to another epoch, that's what you are!"

'His words were so insulting and rude, that I had either to give him a slap in the face, or simply, most demonstratively, to leave the room, without uttering a word. I am no researcher, it is true, and no discoverer

of great truths, but I do cure people, and do my best to make them cough less, have fewer headaches, less pain in their livers, and so on. And he called me a "find" from another epoch. I'm not at all sure that there could be any epochs at all for mankind, if it were not for such "relics" and "finds" like myself!

'But never mind that now; I had either to hit him or leave the room. I have never slapped any one in the face in my life, it is a thing as repulsive to me as death. The thing then was to go out of the room, and turn my back on him.... But I remained where I was....

'You may smile if you like, but that is what happened. And I must tell you that I remained where I was not because I was pusillanimous or because I felt any vacillation in my heart. You don't need a tremendous amount of courage to leave a room or turn a cold shoulder on someone. Anyone can do that, even the greatest coward. I remained where I was, simply because I couldn't bring myself to fly off the handle with that man. How could I be angry with him? He seemed to have put a spell upon me with the flame that burned in his eyes, with the light radiating from his face, with his self-confident manly voice, and if you wish, even with his harsh words. That these words, in so far as they touched me, were insulting and unjust was quite another matter. But his words were sincere, there was conviction behind them, they were beautiful in themselves, carring in them that beauty which you can find in the music of the best revolutionary and military marches. You know that these songs call up massacre and bloodshed — things that are cruel and inhuman and that are alien to you, both body and soul, and when you hear the songs, you are carried away, in spite of yourself, they breathe a kind of intoxicating courage into you, and involuntarily you start marching in step, like a soldier. Yes, by your leave, like a soldier!

'From that day on Emilian took the boy of the pert-nosed lady under his protection. Every day he brought him something: booklets, drawing paper, compasses. rulers and coloured pencils. He also brought him different minerals, he bought him special scales to weigh them in, and a whole lot of other things; and every day a little bagful of the same kind of sweets, that looked and tasted like violets. Even now I can't see why he always bought him the same sweets. He could easily have bought other sweets, too, for the same price, yet he always bought him violets.

'You will surely think that he visited the attic? That being a friend of the boy, he became a friend of the family, or at least of the pert-nosed lady who, to say the least, was not a woman devoid of personality. You would be wrong, if you thought so! You would be hopelessly and utterly wrong! I would say that there was just as much likelihood of his having visited the attic as you. That is just none! I could swear to God that his feet never crossed the threshold.

'"And what about those little gifts?" you may ask. Well, as far as the gifts were concerned, the boy took them himself when he came to see him in the evenings, or Emilian left them for him at the porter's room to be given to him the following day, or else, I took them up to him. It was no trouble for me to go up two flights of stairs or some forty steps!

'And now, I want you to hear the most interesting part of this story. Listen to it and then come and tell me again about that man's nobility of character.

'It was one evening in November. We both felt a little oppressed and decided to while away our boredom by going out. As soon as we came out onto the landing in front of our door — the lady with the pert little nose appeared on the stairs of the uppor floor, running down and calling me by my name. But although she was pretending to call me, her eyes were fixed on Emilian. She was wearing a simple flimsy blouse and holding a small parcel in her hand.

'"Hallo!" she said to Emilian.

'"Hallo! Emilian replied, and I noticed that he held her hand in quite a familiar way for rather a long time.

'"I am Nikolai's mother," she explained.

'"That's what I expected," Emilian smiled. "I always said to myself that Nikolai's mother must be a great beauty."

'Oh, my dear friend, how her cheeks flushed! What a look she cast at him with her big dewy eyes and how quickly she let them drop!

'"I'm exceedingly grateful to you for the way you are treating my Nikolai," she said. Though she was still embarassed, she squared up and stuck out her chest a little, casting a bolder glance at him and offering him her little parcel: "This thing," she went on, "is something that I have made for you with my own hands. It is very modest, but I've prepared it for you with all the gratitude of my heart. Please, take it as a small present from Nikolai and me!"

'Emilian took the little parcel, thanked her very warmly, and kissed her hand. She flushed again, this time even more violently. She was confused, the poor thing, mumbled something and dashed up the stairs as if somebody had frightened her.

'"Touching!" Emilian laughed, when we got out in the street. That it was touching there was no doubt and that is why his merry laughter was somehow out of place, but I kept quiet. To a certain extent I had got accustomed to the strange behaviour of this man.

We dropped in at the tavern this side of Eagle's Bridge, near the bus stop. The tavern was crammed with people and it was only with difficulty that we found a free table. I ordered a bottle of wine, and he, cognac. He surprised me with his taste for strong drinks. But his ability to carry his liquor surprised me still more. True, he was a sturdy fellow, but the cognac, too, was pretty strong. I drink cognac only when I've caught cold, to warm me up. Well, we took our time with our drinks, chatting about different things, and then I suddenly remembered the parcel. "Come on," I said, "let us see your gift. I'm interested to see what that woman has made for you with her own hands." He complied with my request, unwrapped the parcel and spread out a wonderfully beautiful table-cloth, with red embroidery, before our eyes. It was not very big, for it was intended for a small table, but its embroidery was so genuinely Bulgarian, so much our own, that I even felt tears of emotion in my eyes; and I must tell you that, in regard to the tears, the wine had no finger in the pie. That cover reminded me of our old family sitting room where my mother used to treat her guests to morello cherry preserve. In our sitting room there was a low, round table and I remembered that it used to be covered with a similar table-cloth, with red Bulgarian embroidery. That is why I felt a great warmth in my heart, and I told Emilian that the cloth was more than wonderful.

'He agreed with me, but enjoyed the beauty of the cloth merely by looking at it, without expressing his admiration. Then he made a long speech about the national character of the pattern of the embroidery, the psychological principle in its design, etc. I, however, did not listen to him, but thought about old times, about our sitting room and our old house in Elena. (I was born, by the way, in Elena.) We chinked our glasses together several times in drinking toasts to the beautiful table-cloth, and finally rose to go home.

'Outside it was drizzling, and from time to time came gusts of a cold south-east wind, reminding us of the winter which was already knocking at the door. Winter, let me tell you, is the worst and most disagreeable season for ageing bachelors, and in general for all lonely people. In summer you can gladden your heart just by roaming aimlessly through the streets. A whole world teems about you, young people, brilliant shop windows, laughter, sparkling eyes; altogether the world bustles with life in summer; while in winter everyone is in a hurry, everyone tries to find a warm corner somewhere, to be among people, to avoid being alone. Woe to him who has no companion! Because without a companion neither your home attract you, even if it is furnished out with the most expensive furniture, nor does your wine taste good, even if it be genuine and well-matured and sparkling like a diamond.

'I was revolving such thoughts in my head and marching along by the side of my friend, when I suddenly remembered the pert-nosed lady's table-cloth. Man's head is a strange contraption, indeed, my dear fellow! You are thinking, let us say, of the traditional

carp cooked on St Nichola's Day, which you are supposed to be going to eat tomorrow in the company of good friends in a well-heated house, and all of a sudden the thought of a letter of your aunt's which you have failed to reply to for six months flashes across your mind....

'"Did you take that cloth with you?" I asked.

'We had already got to the bridge in Shipka Street.

'He began fumbling at once first in one, then in the other of his coat pockets. Then he shrugged his shoulders, without making a reply.

'"Did you forget it?" I asked incredulously.

'"It seems, I did," Emilian replied.

'We stood on the bridge looking down at the water, which was gurgling noisily in its bed. The rain began to fall faster. Or maybe the wind was scooping up the rain drops and flinging them more violently in our faces, because the place where we stood was more exposed.

'"Let's go back," I said. "If we walk fast, we can reach the tavern in fifteen minutes."

'"Go back, why?" Emilian asked with surprise.

'I looked at his face which was calm and cool and as impenetrable as granite.

'"That cloth..." I started to say, but did not finish my sentence. There was no sense in talking. When you have the feeling that there is no sense in your talking, you fail to find words.

'"The cloth won't get lost," Emilian said. "The waiter who served us will put it away. If he is an honest man, he will give it to the landlord and it will be stowed away in his drawer until called for. If the waiter is not an honest man he will hide it away in his coat. 'Look what I've bought for you!' he will lie to his wife as he gives it to her. And his wife will be pleased. It is good, that she'll be pleased. And in the final count, doctor," he turned up his coat collar, shrugged his shoulders and yawned in a tired way, "in the final count it's all the same to me who'll be its owner. I'm telling you most sincerely that it's all the same to me. I don't care much for such things. Let's go!"

'"But that woman strained her eyes embroidering it for you, and nobody else!" I protested, catching him by the elbow.

'"So what?" Emilian retorted rudely. He was capable of looking at you with such killing disdain that you felt cold shivers run down your back. And I must tell you that his disdain was manifested in an endless number of shades. This man, who charmed people with his bright, inspired smiles, was also, at the same time, a magician whose weapon was disdain, now cruel, now condescending, then good-natured, and again full of contempt. But the disdain I discerned in his eyes that night was crushing, and I took it ill.

'Thus we walked the rest of the way to our house without exchanging a word. I don't remember whether I answered him when he finally bade me good night. Neither do I remember when I fell asleep or whether I fell asleep at all. I was turning things over in my mind and all kinds of thoughts about that man kept coming into my head. I could not explain to myself this strange cohabitation in him — a radiant smile living so to say under the same roof with disgusting disregard for others, with a crushing disdain. To tell you the truth, I haven't been able to unriddle his character, even to this day.

'But I sometimes say to myself that the bad in him was not organic, was not a natural ingredient of his character. For, if these disgusting traits which I have mentioned had been traits inherent in his character, he would have been, to put it plainly, a disgusting man. And no radiant smiles and no lofty words would have been able to cover up the ugliness of his soul. Oh, my dear fellow, I know very well what your objections will be: if a man is an angel by nature, you can steep him in a barrel of tar and he will still be radiant and pure. But, let me tell you, that there are no angels in life, angels exist only in the Gospel and in the imagination of various muddle-headed and naive persons. In life there are good people who, without being angels, can never in any circumstances become rogues. All kinds of inclinations lie dormant in these good people, but what inclinations blossom out and bear fruit in life depends upon a thousand different things.

'In Emilian, who is fundamentally a good and powerful character, the following inclinations have developed: to treat some people like worn-out pennies, like worthless copper coins — worthless little coins that have been withdrawn from circulation. I say some people, because I know only a few people he came into touch with by chance when be came to live with us at Marin Drinov Street. At the same time, of course, he must have had a lot to do with many other people, but I don't know what these people were and how he behaved towards them. The chemist, the mother of that boy, and myself, all of us for that matter, if I may be allowed to put it in astronomical language which is fashionable now, all of us crossed his orbit accidentally, appearing for a day or two in his world and then vanishing, each one on his own way. But he undoubtedly had his own circle of people with whom he was in contact every day, both through his work and through the things he was interested in. How he behaved with them, I regret to say, I don't know. A little after these things happened I left to do my specialization, but I heard that he had gone out into the mountains at the head of a geological survey team to look for copper.

'And our ways parted .... I met him yesterday by chance, but I was in a hurry, because I had an urgent case, and the weather was so awful I couldn't remain talking there outside very long. He impressed me yesterday as a man who in these two years had gone through things which other people experience in a decade. It was quite plain, too, that he was in no mood to chat, that he was in a hurry to get rid of me, that he had forgotten me and did not particularly care to renew our old acquaintance .... That's his own business, anyway! In my practice I've had cases in which I cured somebody of a simple cold and they have never forgotten me, sending me New Near cards and talking in a friendly way whenever we've met and inviting me for drinks. I've had other cases of people whose children I've pulled through diphtheria, say, or pneumonia, who barely nod to me when they pass in the street. Well, I say to myself, never mind. The main thing is that the child got over it. And I go to the tavern and have a solitary glass of cognac, all by myself.

'Well, as I said, I was trying to find out what the attitude of our friend was towards the people with whom he worked, whom he loved, with whom he argued while settling important questions. Because his knowledge, the post, which he held, and the responsibilities he shouldered singled him out as a remarkable man. When faced with big problems he was in his element. It was interesting for me to find out what his attitude to those people was: whether he passed them by as a rich man scorns worthless pennies, with indifference, because the thoughts of the rich are focused on big sums, although, after all, every big sum is made up of many tiny pennies.... As a rule, however, rich men look with indifference at a penny.

'When I treat somedody, I do it to help him recover, so that he'll be able to drink his beer in the evenings or play a game of cards if he likes; in a word, to make him happy and let him make other people happy when they meet him at work or at table. When I treat somebody I don't think of mankind, of any great accomplishments in the name of humanity, but just do what I can and what must be done because that is my profession and because, after all, that is what I am paid for. Emilian said that such an approach to one's profession smelled of Philistinism, that it was narrow-minded, limited, and was not in the "style of the epoch". All right. Maybe that is so. I'm not protesting. It surely must be so, because, frankly speaking, when I treat somebody I do not think of humanity at all, nor of any society, except in cases of epidemics and mass cases of some of the more severe forms of 'flu. Then I take the necessary measures on a regional or district scale, according to what my official duties call for.

'So, as a doctor I may not be in the style of the epoch, but I am ready to swear that every man's health is dear to my heart, although I do not care too much for humanity and only take advantage of other people's discoveries. Emilian speaks a lot about humanity, displaying great enthusiasm for the welfare of society, and he must surely be doing great deeds both for the present and for the future, because he is really a capable, active and powerful man. He is, as they say, a man thoroughly "in the style of the epoch". A fine fellow! Yes, but that same Emilian, as you see, often fails even to notice a man, often treats him like a worthless copper coin.

'How and why has it come so? Why is it that he, the noble, handsome, magnanimous man, the man "with a marshal's baton in his knapsack" has become like the rich man who looks with cold indifference on the worthless pennies? How did it come so? Is he to blame for it or some outside factors? My wise and wonderful landlady would have answered: "Allah alone knows why it came so." I am supposed to be more learned than she is but, if you were to ask me, I would answer you in the same way: "Allah alone knows why!" In Allah's cause I would never stake even a worthless copper coin, but that is the ways people express themselves. As you see, I cannot give you an answer to this question

'But what business of mine is it to answer it, anyway? I don't carry a marshal's baton in my doctor's bag, and I am not eager to make any discoveries, great or small. I treat my patients because I have to treat them, and I am glad when I can get them up out of their beds. And that is all. It is none of my business to answer complicated, tricky questions. I prefer drinking my beer and chatting with friends on simpler topics.

'And finally, you will surely ask me what happened to the chemist. But even if you didn't ask me I should tell you about her. I have not forgotten her, either in my story or in my heart. That same day when I returned to our flat, I told her: "You see, the name of the factory where you work just slipped out of Emilian's memory. The poor fellow was tired and overworked, he is absent-minded like most scientists, and that is why he forgot it. Don't bear him a grudge on that score and don't attach too great importance to this trifling incident." That was what I said to her, fully aware that I was lying and that in lying I was acting against my own interests, for there was still a glimmer of hope in my heart that some wonder might happen, that her eyes would be opened and she would see that I, although not endowed with any great talents, was not a man to be utterly discarded. This little glimmer of hope was burning in my heart, yet I was acting against it, defending the honour of my friend, selling my soul to the devil to get them reconciled and bring them together again. And I couldn't tell you why I behaved so, whether for Emilian's sake, or because I saw that she was suffering. But I think that anyone in my place would have acted the way I did. Well, I lied to her, saying that the name of the factory had just slipped out of Emilian's memory. But do you think this cheered her up and made her eyes smile and alleviated her pain? I wished it had been so! But no, nothing of the kind happened. She listened coldly — it would be nearer the truth to say she listened inimically to my words. She told me that this topic did not interest her any more, telling me in a dry voice, in which there was a hostile note, not to busy myself further with her affairs. That was the disgraceful end of my goodwill mission — utter failure.... But those ties which had sprung up between her and Emilian, they, too, were gone with the wind. She did not turn her back on him, like a simpleton — on the contrary. She returned his greetings, at times spoke to him, but as you greet a casual acquaintance, as you talk on a station platform while waiting for a train that is late in coming.

'And Emilian? He was neither sad, nor did he lose his appetite — he behaved as if there had been nothing before and as if nothing had happened afterwards. With her or without her — it was all the same to him. My chemist's indifference was a mask, of course, behind which her heart writhed in pain. His indifference, on the other hand, was genuine and natural. Tell me, can you bear a grudge against such a man? You bear grudges against liars or hypocrites, but he was neither a liar nor a hypocrite.

'Our little world in that flat began gradually to disintegrate. The chemist was the first to leave us — she and her aunt moved to other lodgings. Then Emilian left for the mountains to prospect for ore. While I was waiting for him — and I was indeed waiting for him to return — I got that assignment abroad, more than a year after they had told me to pack my suitcases and get ready for the trip....

'Now, while they are completing the building of the hospital in the county town, I am acting as district doctor in these parts. If I had somebody to talk to in the evenings or to drink my coffee with — I should not find it so bad here. But as a matter of fact, perhaps, it is better so. For I might make friends with somebody, we might live for a month or two under the same roof, and then, if we happened to meet in the open, a year or two later — he might tell me: "Look here, my dear friend, I'm awfully busy. I've no time for chatting. So long!" and then turn his back on me. No, thank you, old chap! I prefer not to disturb the peace and quet of my heart, I do not like other people's fingers tinkering with my heart, even though they're golden like Emilian's.

'It is too bad, my dear friend, that I can't forget that man and that I always remember his good traits. I am absolutely clear about the intractable side of his character, too, but I cannot bring myself to dislike him. I know that you will find no logic in my words. Where does his charm spring from? The chemist, too, realized that he had behaved towards her like a scoundrel, but I wager a million gold coins to one copper penny, that to this day she is carrying him in her heart, where she will carry him for a long time to come — maybe all her life.

'I often ask myself: "Isn't our attachments to him after all an eloquent proof of our being nothing but worthless copper coins in life?" Because "copper coins" in life are always inclined to worship somebody, even though they know that their deity is haughty, stern and cruel like the God of Hosts of Moses.'

With these words Ivanaki concluded his story about Emilian. It was close on midnight.

CHAPTER THREE

I returned to Sofia with a wonderful tufted rug and a still more wonderful portrait in my heart. 'What a romanticist you are,' you will say. Carrying a portrait in your heart: That sounds affected and commonplace, doesn't it?

I beg your pardon! You can say whatever you like about me, but I am going to paint in the ground colour of a big canvas, and when in a month or two I have finished my 'Man of Our Epoch' I'll take you to my studio and will ask you: 'Well my friend, can you see some of your own traits in this canvas?'

It was in such a cheerful mood that I returned from Kesten village. I was happy, felt strong, and my fingers were itching to work. I patted the old engine of my jaded jeep and said to it: 'Be patient for a little while now.' I would meet my closest friends with a mysterious smile and say: 'Be patient for a while.' I felt like crying out to all the people whom I knew and did not know: 'Be patient, my dears, your own images will soon appear on my canvas, because I'm carrying a wonderful theme in my heart. And what a theme! You will all be reflected in it, from the tops of your heads to your toes. Such a picture shall I paint.'

But I had no taste for shouting, and I would never have said this aloud.

This, of course, is mere jesting. Now it sounds out of place and, I would say, a bit light-minded and crude,

because it recalls fine moods of which no trace has remained, and fine intentions, which have so far not borne any fruit. You can surely guess, and it would not be hard for you to realize that my work on the portrait did not proceed very smoothly. And if my old idea of gathering together all the features of the man of our age in a single image had not struck such deep roots in my heart, I should long ago have given up working on the portrait with a feeling of infinite relief. Many were the themes that I had collected in my heart! I could have painted, for instance, Nourié against the background of the spruce copse, or my master-founder from the Electrometal Plant, glowing in the light of the sparkling steel with an iron rod like a sceptre in his hand — a veritable Hephaestus forging not a deadly weapon for the fleet-footed Achilles, but a ploughshare for a tractor-driven plough. A shepherdess on a co-operative farm and a represantative of our steel-mining industry were both characters typical of our epoch, and through their portraits I could express many of the typical features of our times.

But should I give up my theme? Nourié's romantic charm and nature itself, with all the magnificence of its stern, primitive beauty, was mirrored in Emilian's image; the spirit of selfless friendship lived in his image, for otherwise why should he have accompanied me on that stormy night when we met for the first time? His portrait had in it the manly strength of the Electrometal founder and a thousand other things which were nameless, but taken together made up our epoch, the times which we were transforming into big and small dreams and into all sorts of actions, new to history, but inherent in man even in the days of Odysseus.

Even if I had wished to give up the portrait, I should not have had the strength to do so. I saw Emilian in my dreams as if he stood before me in flesh and blood. The snow was falling quietly from a dark, lowering sky and he was marching across the snowy waste just as I had seen him with my own eyes and just as I had carried him in my imagination and in my heart ever since. He was marching across the snowy waste, strong, handsome and harsh, as if he had been born amid the white elements of the North, of which he was complete master. A northern god with an iron will, with a cool mind and a warm heart. He was capable of changing the age-old beds of the great rivers and of blocking their flow with tremendous dams. He could do everything. He created new towns in places where wild beasts had roamed until yesterday. His eyes penetrated down to the depths of the earth and looked up to the stars, and they were not the eyes of a delicate dreamer, but the daring eyes of an Alexander the Great, who had set out to conquer the world. He was the man who would set out tomorrow along the unknown roads of our endless Galaxy, a stern Argonaut, ready to wrestle with all the storms in the oceans of the world and with all the storms in the snowy wastes and sandy deserts in order to capture the Golden Fleece, both for himself and for his weaker brethren. Such was the man of our epoch.

I saw him in my dreams as a real man. And when I actually took my brush to paint him, I looked at the bill of fare from the tavern we had sat in — and he was there, sketched on the paper in pencil, and looking almost the same as I saw him in my dreams. Then my work on the portrait began to go well.

But sometimes he emerged in my memory with eyes filled with callousness, with a smile which was frank, indeed, but crushing with its disregard and insulting condescension. He seemed to take no notice of the people around him and, if he did notice them, he paid no attention to them, as the rich man with his boundless wealth pays no attention to a copper coin. Why did I see him like that? Because I used to recall some of my own impressions of him and certain episodes in Ivanaki's story, which had a repulsive effect on me like the smell of chlorine.

You may well ask what there was that was of such significance in my impressions and in the little episodes in Doctor Ivanaki's story?

True! What was there? . . . But don't get huffy if I smile, for I am not in the habit of smiling wickedly or condescendingly. I am only thinking, and I have a right to think, haven't I? I think, just imagine it, that in many cases you show the most essential features of your character in trifles that are quite insignificant at first sight. For you can adjust yourself to events of importance, but it is in the little things, the insignificant things that you are always naked, always just as your nature prompts you to be.

I would recall some of my own impressions and then some episodes in the doctor's story and I would always have the feeling that they did not at all concide with the image of the 'god' whom I was carrying in my heart. Then I would stare at the bill of fare and the sketch of Emilian which I had drawn on it in pencil. And a strange thing would happen. He looked almost as stern as he was in my imagination and as he emerged in my memory; and then, after I would recall those unpleasant things about him, a man was looking at me from the sketch with the eyes of a Caesar, eyes that were, perhaps, looking for the pyramids and seeing the Roman eagle above them. And he took no notice of me, and doctor Ivanaki and the chemist and the mother of the small boy, of any of us.

Then I would take my palette and hurl it with all my might at the canvas. The colours would splatter all over it and the portrait would look like a ridiculous, miserable scarecrow. The northern god and Caesar turned into a poor clown, the most wretched clown that ever walked the earth.

How was all this going to end?

Once, I think it was when I was starting the tenth or eleventh variant of the portrait, I don't remember which, a stranger knocked at my door.

It was in the last days of October. It was raining outside and in my studio it was rather dark. I turned on the strong light above the easel.

'Take a seat,' I said, showing the stranger to a wooden stool. It was comparatively clean, without any paint smeared on it, so he could easily have sat down on it. But he stood at the door, smiling and somewhat confused and shaking his head. 'Just as you please,' I said. Or, maybe I only thought of saying something of the kind, for after all, I could not force him to sit on my wooden stool. And then I did not feel like chatting because that day again my work on the portrait had marked no progress.

'I am bringing you a letter from Emilian Kirov,' the stranger said softly.

'Is that so?' I said with surprise. This was quite unexpected and very interesting. And who knows why I sat on the stool, beaming foolishly. A letter? Since that night, when we had parted at Lukité village, a long time had elapsed and I had not seen him since then. I did not know his address, nor had I any idea where to look for him. 'A letter?' I said, and my eyes rested quite accidentally on the ridiculous scarecrow spread out on my other easel. That easel was hidden away in the niche under the garret window. I had kicked it there yesterday after I had hurled the paint-covered palette at it. 'A letter?' I repeated and suddenly felt a great heaviness and pain in my heart, a disgusting feeling, as if the blood had stopped circulating in my veins. 'I beg you to let me know where I can see him.' I said, 'because the letter, whatever it may be, is of no use to me. I want to know where I can find him,' I cried out, quite plainly losing my self-control. Two years of fruitless work on this portrait had been an awful strain on my nerves and made me nearly hysterical.

The stranger's eyebrows twitched, he took his eyes away from my face and frowned. He was a small, hollow-cheeked man and was wearing a short light overcoat, which made him still shorter. His face was energetic and manly, with a tan too deep for the late autumn season.

And so, I asked him finally where I could find my friend. Nearly two years had elapsed since we had parted at Lukité village, and he had never shown up once. 'And he will never show up any more,' the stranger nodded with a significant pause. Then he added that he who no longer exists, never shows up. He was right, and I agreed with him. I should have had to be a superstitious fool to maintain the opposite.

I lit a cigarette, inhaled the smoke several times. and asked him when and where he had died. And I got up automatically from the stool, and again automatically went to the niche under the garret window where my second easel was hidden away. I turned it with its face to the wall, so that the miserable scarecrow could not be seen on the stretched canvas.

Two years ago a group of engineers had left for Mali. Emilian had been one of them. He had done well there, discovering valuable ore deposits, and the government of Mali had awarded him a high order. The time drew near for their return to Bulgaria and it was then that the unfortunate incident happened. Emilian had made friends with the natives, whom he loved like brothers, living with them in a clay cabin and eating broth with them from a common bowl. The natives, too, considered him as one of themselves, loved him as a brother, and were ready to go through fire for him or to cross the jungle in the season of the heaviest rains. So sociable, modest and amiable had that man been! Young and old, those who were still uncivilized, and those who had already learned to read and write had a place, one and all, in his heart that was open to everyone.

He often used to go out hunting with the younger people. And it was his passion for dangerous hunting that was his undoing. If he had fallen a victim to the savage claws of a leopard or to the cruel fangs of a lion, it would have been quite a different matter. He was killed, however, by a thorn, by a poisonous thorn. The leopard failed to kill him, but a deadly thorn took his life. He even did not notice this tiny thorn, when it scratched his knee!

The mysterious poison was slow in doing its deadly work, killing him gradually. He lost strength, grew weak, wiltered, but felt no pain, only, in the last few days, he had a struggle to breathe and felt his head swimming. About a fortnight before his real agony set in, Emilian, realizing that he was not getting better, and that the outcome was doubtful, asked for a thick notebook and spent several hours a day writing in it.

He passed away quietly, closing his eyes never to open them again, while lying in his hammock in the thick shade of a few mango trees that were clustered together.

From his briefcase the stranger produced a big bulging envelope, wiped his hand across it as if the envelope had been dusty, then came up to the small table and put it solemnly on the unopened tubes of paint.

'I got your address from the Union of Artists,' he said.

I nodded. 'Thank you very much,' I replied. Or, maybe I didn't reply at all, I don't remember. But I must surely have nodded.

When I realized that the stranger had gone, I opened the envelope and took out the letter and the notebook with trembling fingers. The letter contained only a few lines:

> 'In the neighbourhood of Bamaco, a few days before the livernage, in Louis-Philippe's garden.
>
> 'This notebook contains a few handfuls of biographical material. If your work does not progress satisfactorily, use it; if it has made good progress, throw it into the fire. In both cases, I shake your hand most heartily.
>
> *Emilian*'

I opened the window. Grey curls of smoke were swirling here and there above the wet roofs. A light wind had begun to blow and the rain was beating now hard, now softly, against the sheet iron that covered the window sill, beating out an irregular tattoo on it, as if some rusty old sewing machine was at work.

I stayed for a while leaning my elbow on the window frame. I felt how the rain fell on my face, and had no desire to withdraw from the window. I tried to fool my eyes and my mind by fixing them on trifling things, but the roofs of the houses in front had been known to me for a very long time.

Then, when I got fed up with it all, with the rain and the brick-red rectanges of the chimneys, and the grey smoke that was settling in layers above the wet tiles, I turned round, wiped my wet face with the palm of my hand and dragged myself to the switch. The second before turning on the light, I had the feeling that my room looked like the bottom of a deep pool. In it I saw only the white tops of my two easels that were hardly discernible. They reminded me of the hands of a drowning man, or who knows what. This was silly of course, and I started whistling to myself. And when I sat down at the table and opened Emilian's notebook, I suddenly found myself giving an uneasy ear to all the sounds and shrugged my shoulders in confusion: I was whistling an old, a very old war march, probably dating back to the time of the Balkan War.

Part II

THE SEVEN DAYS

LILIAN

June 1, 8 o'clock a. m.

I do not know whether I slept in fits and starts, or spent the whole night half awake, caught, as if in a red-hot vice, by some vague weird nightmare that was a series of identical pictures, following each other in endless succession.

I opened my eyes with a strange word in my mind: *katmandu*. I thought I had neither heard nor read that word anywhere. It seemed to be crawling in a no man's land between sleeping and waking, and its presence in my mind made me start making wild guesses. At any rate, I knew no plant, nor any living being, nor concept for that matter, that bore that name.

In fact, *katmandu* no longer creeps in that mist which I can still see in my mind's eyes, lying as it then lay like a ragged fleecy cloud between sleeping and waking; it is simply a rustling sound now. But it rustles with a lifeless sound, a lazy, sluggish sound I cannot catch.

I have seen bushes in the most northern part of the country, in the desert, rustling in the same way as *katmandu* does. I have watched those bushes, both during the scorchingly hot season of broiling sunshine and during sandstorms, when the *Haramatan* wind, blowing his one hundred thousand bellows, made those who were superstitious or had jumpy nerves think of the frightful day of the Apocalypse. In hours of quiet the rough leaves, miserable as worn-out shoesoles, hang motionless from the bushes, as, for instance, do the poor wretches hanging from the gallows. But when the *Haramatan* opens its gorge, these yellow-brown rags of leaves will start dancing the wildest weird chain dance a sick mind can imagine. They dance in a terribly wild way, without touching each other and without making any noise. They let out not a single tone of their own in accompaniment to the storm. They rustle, but with dead sounds, like my *katmandu.*

That was the strange and non-existent word under the spell of which I awoke this morning — a combination of sounds that had drifted into my sub-conscious mind, most probably from some dialect of the language group Mandringo, maybe from Bambara or Serer.... Or maybe it was a combination of sounds in the phonetic style of the ancient languages Volof and Bantu.... For any sound combination could penetrate into that language jungle, and most of all, into the roots of the Mandringo language group.

But I do not exclude yet another possibility: that an encyclopaedia or an encyclopaedic dictionary may have lain at the bottom of this mysterious phenomenon. Two days ago, for instance, I asked my people to buy me an English encyclopaedical dictionary of the equatorial African flora from the international book-shop in Bamako. Maybe it is through this dictionary that the word *katmandu* has got into my mind. The tiny letters of this word may have wedged themselves somewhere between the folds of my memory, and now, two days later, they have slipped out and, at that, just before waking. Or to be more precise, before I was fully awake. Because the word 'fully' has a meaning of its own, which should not be overlooked. To be awake is one thing, and to be fully awake is quite another thing.

I close my eyes, listening to the silence and lie so for a moment or two, almost without breathing. Now I know that I am fully awake. Nothing remains of my sleep and my slumber; gone, too, is that name, *katmandu,* which does not exist, vanished into the realm of non-existence. I keep saying to myself that I will never again think of it.

It is dark in the room, the Venetian blinds are down, the edges of their slats fastened down over each other. Where they do not touch, light glistens through the chinks like razors' edges and the sunny lava of the equatorial day peeps in. Suddenly before me I see our street. It is a street, because all other streets are only lanes. In fact, they are not even lanes, but empty spaces fantastically crooked between little houses, fenced and unfenced, and scattered at random. Throw a handful of dried beans on a shinings silver tray. Then draw a straight line between the beans with your finger: this is our town, at one day's distance by train from Bamaco. The straight line drawn by passing your finger between the beans, bore, prior to the liberation, the sonorous name of an illustrious French general. Now it is called the Boulevard de la Liberté. It is a small boulevard, seven or eight hundred yards in length, with tall green palm trees lining it on both sides, shining with the white façades of restaurants, shops and banks, always smiling with their gay-coloured awnings. The sunshades keep the shops below them cool and shady and protect the heads of two remarkable men from the flaming sun. They are good friends of mine, Jacques and Ahmed, vendors of orange juice. Loud red, yellow, and blue shriek at the top of their voices from awnings and sunshades. These vivid colours and the laughter, the intoxicating joyous laughter, are probably the only kings whom the people of Mali will never part with. Jacques is black and short, Ahmed is chocolate bronze and drawn out in height like a slim Gothic statue. They smile at me with their warm, friendly smiles and I wave my hand to them.

'Jacques,' I say, 'a glass of fruit juice for me!'

'Right, sir!' Black Jacques' teeth glisten like mother-of-pearl, and I say to myself that this is probably due to his fruit diet: Jacques rarely eats meat.

'Till when are you going to call me "sir"? Didn't we agree that you'd call me "mate"?'

I don't know to what flower Jacques' smile can be likened. There can hardly be such a flower. Imagine a man who until yesterday had nothing, and today owns the whole world. Until yesterday this boulevard was the inaccessible street of the stockholders of the Messagérie Africaine, and when it happened that Jacques had to pass along it, with a load on his back, he felt like an uninvited alien in a hostile, cruel world. But now the street with the white housefronts is his, as ore the sun and the scorching hot air, which he breathes, while the gentlemen of the Messagérie Africaine and of the Société de Bamako, when they do show up from here and there, are the aliens, the uninvited guests getting their suitcases ready to leave. That is why Jacques' smile is the smile of a man who till yesterday had nothing but owns the whole world today.

'It is a bad habit to call your friends "sir",' I grumble, drinking the cold orange juice at one gulp. I am not really grumbling, of course, but only expressing my grief. I place a coin on the shining counter and hurry away, before Jacques has had time to fill another glass for me. For this second glass he will never take money from me, and that is the reason I hasten to leave his awning before he has pressed the handle of his tremendous cylindrical syphon.

I feel his eyes on my back — an overpowering flow of admiration, of mystic respect mingled with grief. Grief because I never drink that second glass.

Over the white, flat-roofed buildings, lined up like soldiers along the Boulevard de la Liberté and over the grey little houses that are scattered as if by the *Haramatan,* over all this small tropical world the grey ash-coloured sky is pouring down its unbearable heat. Breathing is not easy under this heated, leaden lid-like sky, and Europeans seldom go on foot on the boulevard, in spite of the shade cast by the tall palm trees and the gay-coloured awnings. But the natives, Tuaregs, Benà, Mauritanians, never find any difficulty in breathing in the suffocating heat, nor are they particularly impressed by the scorching sun. They feel all right, like the fish in the cool waters of the Niger, and like the ibises and flamingos in the marshes along the river. For they are in their homeland, and everyone feels pretty well in his homeland.

I stretch out my hand in the dark and press the button of the night lamp. The room is instantly flooded with green light. My box of a room, the best at the Hôtel de Palme, seems to be lying at the bottom of the bright-green depths of the sea. That is what I am saying to myself, although I have never dived deep into the sea. In my country, in North Bulgaria, the rivers are shallow and there are no places to dive into. But here the waters of the swollen Niger are somehow strangely turbid, "thick", and not very hospitable, teeming with an infinite number of beasts of prey, large and small. An encounter with them is not always agreeable and not without danger, and that is why swimmers avoid diving down deep. Yet I have the feeling of being deep underwater, at the bottom of some river or sea, because my room is flooded with green light and is exceedingly quiet.

My eyes turn towards the big thermometer, the stately thermometer attached to an ebony plate, on which there are two scales: a centigrade and Réaumur. A lady in a ridiculously long dress and with a straw umbrella-like hat stands on the centigrade scale, playfully smiling at somebody. There were days when I was well, and then I felt that she was not smiling just at anybody but at me. I tried to imagine what her legs looked like, because the long skirts of her dress covered them to the toes, but I looked most of the time at her face, which was a beautiful, light-hearted southern face. It reminded me of dark green southern vines, of southern wine and of many other pleasant things. The lady reminded me of something that was close to my heart, that was gay and at the same time a little vulgar, and that is why I was very happy when she seemed to fix her eyes on me.

On the Réaumur scale there is a grinning chimpanzee with a ripe banana in his hairy paws. Both pictures are etchings. You see only the outlines of the figures, but I always try to imagine what the colours would have been like. The lady is dressed in a white muslin dress, in little white clouds of gauze, and her umbrella is blue like the sky and decorated with yellow flowers. Her eyes are sometimes black and sometimes blue, but her lips are always carmine. The chimpanzee's hair is dark brown, blackish brown, and the banana which the monkey holds in its paw is a waning yellow, amber yellow. A beautiful woman and a shameless chimpanzee — a queer thermometer, indeed!

I paid no attention to the chimpanzee even in the days when I was in perfect health. 'To hell with the monkey,' I would say to myself when I was well. 'I'd much rather look at the lady with the umbrella!' If the monkey is in her way, if the brazen display of its red hind parts makes her feel uncomfortable, I'll throw it out with a good kick in the pants! I had never given anyone a kick in the pants, but deep in my heart I had the feeling that I was capable of doing it. I even had the feeling that I had done such things, and that feeling made me unhappy. But there were days when I did not think of the past, and then I measured the chimpanzee with an evil eye. I looked at it from top to toe, clenching my teeth as if it were a live monkey holding a real banana in its paws.

I hated it on account of that woman with the umbrella. But even if the woman had not been there, I would still have hated it. For the chimpanzee was a symbol of the past, of yesterday, it symbolized the gay old days of Crédit Lyonnais and Messagérie Africaine: Messagérie Africaine used to devour the bananas of the Tuaregs and then used to show them its red hind parts. Greedy and artful, but not very perspicacious was that chimpanzee! How could it ever have dreamt that those bronze giants, deprived of all rights, would one day succeed in getting the better of it. It was like Monsieur Charles Denois, the former proprietor of the fine Hôtel de Palme. Even in his most terrible nightmares Mr. Charles Denois had never imagined such a thing: that the bronze plate on the white marble wall of the front of the hotel, bearing the name of Colonel Bonnet, the Conqueror, would be replaced by another bronze plate, very much like the first, but a new name on it, that of Boulevard de la Liberté....

Well, the thermometer is, nevertheless, in front of me. I look at the ruby column: it has reached the line opposite which stands the figure '20', written out in rococo style. I look at the ruby column and at this flowery figure and do not take the least interest any more in the lady with the umbrella — she is smiling at somebody, but I am quite indifferent. I am thinking of the air-conditioning system in my room. Outside, the sun seems to be pouring down molten lava, the thermometers surely show 50°C in the shade, while a Nordic summer reigns in my box of a room, which is cool as a sheltered Scandinavian fjord. This is what perfect air-conditioning means — it brings the cool northern summer almost down to the equator. Dear Charles Denois must have known his job perfectly well! And I have always respected people who know their jobs thoroughly. I take off my hat to all thinking businessmen like Mr. Charles Denois! And then the thought occurred to me at that moment that I was kowtowing to him in much the same way as the old women in Bulgaria bowed to Saint George, the Victor.

Then I call in Jacques and tell him to bind Mr. Denois with strong ropes on the back of a sturdy camel and send him out into the desert to let him have a chat with the *Haramatan*. And when Mr. Denois is out in the desert and has started chatting with the one hundred thousand mad souls of the *Haramatan*, I and the lady on the thermometer will sigh bitterly and remember our own sins. Then I shall take up the telephone receiver and order a bottle of whiskey, with ice, and two glasses — one for myself and one for the gracious lady with the umbrella.

Twenty degrees Centigrade. If somebody had told me a month ago that I should be steeped in sweat at such an insignificant temperature, I should surely have placed my hand on his forehead to check whether he himself had no temperature. If he had added that I should lose my strength to such a degree that I should have to make a great effort of will to raise my right hand, I should have said to myself that the fellow was simply pulling my leg. And I should have acted as people do who are not accustomed to being laughed at for no reason at all. And then I should have called in Jacques but, of course, should have done the whole job myself.

Even at the time when I had renounced everything — my engineering title, my money, all that is beautiful in life; when I slept on the bare and muddy earth next to the darkest and shadiest characters who never stayed on at the drills for more than a week or two; even when I had given up my daily shave and was quite indifferent to whether the shirt I wore was washed or looked like a rag — even at that time I always managed to square accounts with all scoffers and cads attempting to ridicule me. But I have nothing in common with the Prince Mishkins, thank God! The truth is that I hold those silent sufferers in greater and more violent abomination, for instance, than I do ordinary rascals and thieves.

Ask my friend Louis Philippe of the Tuaregs, and he will tell you what I was worth a month ago. At that time we were discussing the great hunt and how we were to set about killing the royal jungle thief, and in connection with this I had gone to his cottage for a chat. Louis Philippe was loading his bananas on a diesel truck. They were his bananas, from his own personal farm, some twenty crates in all. Each one of these crates weighed about one hundred pounds. The nearest reception point was about thirty miles from the village and we had to hurry so that the night would not overtake us in the jungle. The truck belonged to the machine-tractor-centre and was driven by a Bulgarian from Pchelaré, named Stilian. Like a native of the steppe, Stilian did not like the jungle, particulary at night, and sat, therefore, behind the wheel shouting from time to time to the Tuareg to hurry up. I don't know whether it was for the sake of Louis Philippe or for the sake of my compatriot, but I rolled up my shirt sleeves and started loading the crates.

Louis Philippe was about six foot five inches tall and was as strong as a horse. In lifting the crates he clenched his teeth, grunting and wheezing through his nose, and on dropping his load on the truck platform he sent to the devil (in the Tuareg tongue) all the evil spirits that had taught man to work. I, on the other hand, was whistling gaily as I did my job, and from time to time bantering merrily with his daughter Silvestra, who was moving busily about, with only a gay-coloured cloth wrapped about her waist. Silvestra, who was almost as tall as her father but of a duskier skin, having been born of a Berberi mother, was giggling all the time, rolling her eyes and shaking with laughter. She was like a little volcano erupting an unrestrained red-hot lava flow of mirth. Everything in her shook with her laughter: her rounded shoulders, her yellow glass bead necklaces, and her sharply pointed breasts, as fresh as the fragrant, but not yet fully ripe bananas.

I lifted the big crates made from sugar cane and jested with Silvestra to while away the time, yet every crate weighed about one hundred pounds.

And just think of it, it was only a month ago!

And now even that whore with the umbrella, that prostitute who goes about with the travel agents, even she looks at me with eyes full of compassion. Compassion is nothing but the sugared syrup with which the healthy try to cheer up those who are ill! I spit on such an ointment!

The same day; one hour later

On the shining white table cloth stands a card with the name *Emilian Kirov* written on it. This is my table — at the far end of the café, next to the huge square plate-glass of the shop window. I pass between the tables with the air of a man who has not had enough sleep and take my customary seat. In the past, there was also a time when I used to pass between the tables like one who had not had enough sleep, but that time now seems to be very far back in the past. I used to arrive in a jeep from my district, about one hundred miles away between the pampas and the jungle, and would drop in at the administration building covered with dust from the trip, my tourist outfit soaked with sour sweat. Then I would go and sit down at my drawing table where I turned the work I had done during the week into coordinates, topographical sketches and figures — plotting the spots where I had discovered manganese, iron, copper. Those were blessed days, indeed! The greater number of coordinates I plotted on the white sheets of paper, the shorter the hours seemed to be: I was losing all sense of time,

So the nights would come. I used to return then to the Hôtel de Palme (Mr. Denois was still the owner), wash, put on my white summer suit and go down into the bar to turn the tropical night into a holiday. These night holidays are the sacred right of those who spend six days a week amid the dried herbage of the pampas, on the border of the silent jungle, under the shroud of a foreign and unimaginably dark sky. After having listened with wide-open eyes to the hissing and the rustling of the python past the sides of his tent, to the crazy cries of the monkeys and the desperate wailing of wild dogs, the guest from the jungle is particularly jealous of his festive nights. I, for one, never renounced my right to celebrate it to the full, because at that time I was as sound as a bell and my work, prospecting for manganese and copper, was making excellent progress. When our group of Bulgarian specialists was accorded an interview in the capital, I told the Minister in charge of geological research: 'If I do not make your department the owner of millions' worth of wealth in a few months' time, I'll go and settle in the jungle among the pygmies or go out to be devoured by the lions!' Of course, the man must have taken me for a prattling braggart. Surely he must have thought so, because when, a month and a half ago, he awarded me his Government's diploma of merit, he shook my hand for a long time, saying that at one time he had sinned against me in his heart. He then confessed his sin, small as it had been, because the heart of a Mali is averse to lying. The heart of a Mali is as pure as a native diamond. So, you see, I had the right to turn the dark, tropical night into a holiday. I think that any victor is entitled to celebrate his victory, when it brings joy to his fellow men. But if I looked for entertainment during those hours of my one-day off from the jungle, I did it mostly out of fear of being alone. To be alone with the pythons in the pampas or with the sleek panther in the jungle was preferable to the green solitude of the room in my hotel. This green

solitude is terrible, especially when you have something weighing on your heart.

At dawn I would go out with the gait of one who had not had enough sleep. I would go out to the boulevard where my jeep was waiting for me. The crowns of the tall palm trees showed red in the rays of the rising sun, and a smell, only perceptible to my nostrils, of scorched herbs, of decaying foliage, and of a sea of rank sun-warmed grass came from my jeep. Oh, those were blessed days, indeed!

I tell the waitress to bring me a glass of whiskey, and a bottle of orange and lemon juice. This overpraised whiskey causes a cramp in my throat, I would readily exchange it for a glass of cool, Bulgarian plum brandy. But how could you get a glass of plum brandy in the tropics? Plum brandy in the tropics would be just as much out of place as the Bulgarian *ruchenitsa* dance at the Follies Bergères. I mix the liquids in a big glass and dissolve a tablet of vitamin concentrate and another tablet containing a strong dose of pure coffein in this disgusting cocktail. Then I stir the damned cocktail with a spoon, frown and drink it.

The cocktail is perfectly idiotic, as are all whiskeys, calvadoses and absinthes, but it does refresh you. It has the same effect on my thoughts as a sergeant has on his soldiers: it makes them fall into rank. Now I examine the rows of tables with a more self-confident eye. There are no essential changes in the picture. The big, bright hall is almost desolate, the customers being all foreigners: experts from Czechoslovakia and from the German Democratic Republic. The manager, an invalid of the Second World War, explains his lack of customers by the 'evaporation' of a number of former regular ones: owners of plantations and shops, souteneurs, the bigger shareholders in the Messagérie Africaine and Office du Niger. Some of them went back to the Metropolis, others, the adventurers, pimps and specialists in subduing an unruly populace, went on to Katanga, Rhodesia and the South African Republic. 'Our bar has lost a number of rich customers, sir,' the Mauritanian laughs slyly 'and the country — a pack of sharks.' I quite agree with him that this is a welcome loss and, involuntarily, recall the former owner of the hotel, Mr. Charles Denois.

In the meantime the waitress comes and brings a porcelain bowl, containing half a dozen peeled bananas, fried in butter and steeped in honey and sugar syrup. I watch the girl as she goes and say to myself that she is swinging her thighs like a black panther. Even if I spoke out my thoughts aloud, the comparison would not sound affected and bookish, because I have seen how a panther runs at close quarters, and not in a closed cage, only a few feet in length and width, but in its natural surroundings, on the borderline between the pampas and the jungle, where the jungle ends in a thinning forest and where the ondulations of the steppe begin. On one side is the dark forest with the shining, vivid colours of its underbrush of bromel and orchids, and on the other — the molten silver of the boundless sun-parched plain. The panther moves on the divide between these two opposite worlds. It is as pliably graceful as if it were made of rubber. It moves like a courtesan, who is fully aware of her charms. It is as if the pads of its terrible paws were shod with invisible velvet, so soft and smooth are they that you feel like caressing them with your hand. I have seen this savage beauty at close range, and so I can claim to have the right to say that the girl with the chocolate skin looks very much like a panther.

I am exceedingly pleased with myself. The poison of that cursed thorn goes on with its deadly work in my veins and is, maybe, about to finish it off, and yet such stupid thoughts cross my mind as the velvety paws of the panther.

Yesterday I was visited by the chief of the Prime Minister's office. He told me two Soviet Il-18 planes were flying along the line Bamako-Marseilles-Paris. I had only to ring up his office.... The Prime Minister was worried about my health.

I do not doubt for a moment in the amiability of the Prime Minister's feelings. My comrades and I did a piece of honest, good work, discovering many new deposits of iron, copper and manganese. The Prime Minister calls me 'mon cher monsieur', and I feel a bit awkward. I indeed discovered rich ore deposits for the Tuaregs, the Mauritanians, the bronze, brown, and black people of Mali, and even the grandsons of their children will still go on digging them out of the earth. But I always have the feeling that I could have done more, that the cordiality underlying the words 'mon cher monsieur' refers to what I could have achieved but had failed to do.

These good people are now sorry that I did not return at once to my own country when my agreement ran out. They are sorry that I remained here, because they like me and fear that I shall die in a *foreign,* albeit *friendly,* land. That is why they are so kindly suggesting that I should fly on the IL-18 straight to Paris.

But I am in no hurry. If I am to die in one or two days, what sense is there in my leaving, even in one of those splendid IL-18's? After all, good people are everywhere your brothers and sisters — they respect a man's memory after his death, provided that in his lifetime he has done *good,* something *good* for them.

In the next seven or eight days — if indeed I am doomed to live no longer — I shall try to re-live both the good and the bad in my life; I shall call to memory many people and with some of them I shall talk as you talk when you know that you are about to leave on a distant and very long journey. Because in life we usually behave like passengers at a big station — we stand on the platform, talk, scurry about for this and that, but our eyes are always fixed on our compartment, all of us are anxious not to lose the good seat next to the *window!* We always have to outstrip somebody, to prevent somebody from taking the seat....

But if I don't die in a few days, and the poison of this thorn fails to finish off the job, I shall have plenty of time for this through flight to Paris. One or two weeks delay in getting to my own country doesn't matter at all. But one or two weeks in a country that I love and in the company of people who love me means a lot.

Well, in my recollection I come back again to Mr.

Charles Denois. I turn to these memories not by chance or through a whim, but because the girl with the chocolate skin reminds me of another girl of the same chocolate colour, who used to walk between the tables in the bar, perhaps, with the same tray in her hands — a year ago, or not quite so much, but that doesn't matter. They called her Loulou, the customers in the bar, but her name was Lilian. Today that same Lilian of the tribe of the Tuaregs, once a waitress at the Hôtel de Palme, that same Lilian is now a tip-truck driver, transporting the parched yellow earth along the bed of the irrigation canal Nakra-Soset. Lilian is now helping to build the canal which will irrigate the meadows and millet and the cotton fields. Charles Denois has nothing to do with her new job, but so that the girl could get her job on the canal, I played him a nasty trick some time ago.

I take a few sips of the vitaminized cocktail again. As I wipe my lips with the napkin I have the feeling that somebody is standing behind my back.

'My dear Louis,' I say without turning round, 'you seem to be a little late today.'

Until recently Louis Grenier was the manager of the only pharmacy in town, and it was owned by the Société de Bamaco.

'Oh, I've come at my usual hour,' Louis replies. 'You're the one who got here earlier.'

He sinks into a chair at the other side of the table and stares at me for a long time in disapproval and with a slight rebuke in his sad Provençal eyes. His eyes are dark, chocolate-black with golden dots around the pupils — the warm South is in them and the fragrance of oranges and the laughter of strong southern wines. The sadness that veils them reminds me of light, downy little clouds chased by the sea wind over the fresh, green plains.

'You still persist in putting off your departure!' Louis says. He smiles at the waitress who has brought him a glass of whiskey and stares after her as she goes.

'Is it not just the same where you are going to die?'

I laugh. Then, after waiting for him to turn his eyes to me again, I ask him:

'What have you decided, Louis? Are you leaving?'

'Oh, God?' Louis says, heaving a sigh. 'How can I tell you?'

This swarthy, curly-haired young man looks like an inexperienced little panther that has got caught in a trap. 'How can I tell you?' he repeats.

His drama does not seem very complex, but he is going through it with much emotion, and with a southerner's sensitiveness. This is what has happened. Immediately after the liberation, the Government nationalized the pharmacies and the Société de Bamaco instructed its employees to return to France at once. Louis, a leftist radical, had sympathized with the liberation movement and that is why the Ministry of Social Welfare in Mali invited him to remain at his job, expressing even its readiness to increase his salary 100 Mali franks. Louis was very glad about this proposal, but was reminded by the head office of the Société de Bamaco that, being a French citizen, his stay in Mali in the service of the government of Mali would hardly be agreeable to certain responsible persons at the Quai d'Orsay.

'It's too bad that I can't find an experienced man to take my place,' Louis sighs.

'So you've made up your mind to leave?'

'I?'

The pride of the southerner delivers a lightning uppercut to the prudence of the employee.

'Yes, you.'

His prudence has been knocked down and at once Louis addresses me in the polite French of 'vous'.

'It seems that you don't know me well enough, Monsieur Kirov.'

I smile condescendingly and remain silent.

His prudence has recovered from its knockout and is now, in its turn, attacking the southerner. Abrupt straight blows are delivered: left, right, at the liver, in the diaphragm.... Louis is grunting and swallowing, his eyes are dim, he has the air of a pugilist who is already 'groggy'.

'When I go back there,' he nods towards the north, 'they'll crush me like a nit, I assure you. Because, sir, I haven't a million to get a licence for a pharmacy of my own. I haven't even one eighth of what they call a million. I'll have to go knocking at their door for a job, and then they'll tell me: "Were you not the man who remained deaf to your country's appeal?" You may say, well, there's a big difference between the Société de Bamako and my country .... Oh, let's not discuss that, sir. You may say anything, but I'm sure they'll shut the door in my face, they'll shut it, there's no doubt about that. Or they may give me a job at some Alpine canteen, selling aspirins to Alpine climbers!'

'Stay here, Louis!' I say. 'The people here like you.'

'That's it; I like them, too.'

'Then what are you worrying about?'

The southerner sits in the corner of the ring, downcast like a girl betrayed in her first love affair. I can't stand sportsmen who give up the fight. Instead of sympathy, such people arouse — who knows why — inexplicable malice in my heart.

'Look here, Louis,' I say, looking beyond his face. 'For an honest man like you there's but one way out.'

'Well, what is it?' Louis asks, brightening up with hope.

'Go where the Niger is the deepest and jump head foremost into the water!'

'And you're giving me this advice, sir, when you know that I'm a very poor swimmer?'

'Precisely.'

Louis sits silent for a while, then calls the girl with the chocolate skin and pours a pile of money into her hand, maybe all he's got. His face assumes a tragic look, he bids me goodbye and leaves the bar with drooping shoulders.

'He may actually go and drown himself!' I say to myself. You can expect anything of these Provençal people! Anything that's foolish!

But there is no anxiety in my heart, and I am absolutely indifferent to what the man does: whether he goes and gets drowned in the Niger or stays and drinks his whiskey in the bar next door.

I recall Lilian's case and feel a pleasant warmth in my heart. I always feel a pleasant warmth in my heart when I happen to think of her case.

Julien Lemaitre, captain in the local police force, was an intimate friend of Mr. Charles Denois. Julien Lemaitre supplied choice girls to the Hôtel de Palme and Mr. Denois remunerated his efforts with cheques to be drawn on the Marseilles branch of the Messagérie Africaine. This trade, which as a matter of fact, was never beset with any particular difficulties, owing to the misery in which the 'natives' lived, flourished in the last few months before the liberation: the masters had become very open-handed with their money, feeling that their days on Mali soil were numbered. The reinforced police and military units, which the leaders of the Fifth Republic kept dispatching to save the regime, swelled the number of customers in all bars and brothels several times over. An acute shortage of women made itself felt. The regime was going hopelessly to the dogs, and Mr. Denois was fishing for his last golden carps in these troubled waters.

Lilian had three brothers and two sisters — all younger than her. Her father was porter at the station, but more often than not returned home empty-handed. On such days, when he came back home without bringing the expected loaf of bread, Lilian would take the youngest ones, her two little sisters, by the hand and go with them to the European quarter to ransack the tin garbage bins for their dinner. One evening the little gang happened to invade the yard of the Hôtel de Palme, and it was here that Julien Lemaitre saw Lilian for the first time. With the eye of a man well-versed in his trade, he assessed the charms of the girl, who was dressed only in a short tunic girdled with a cord, and rubbing his hands together, he calculated the eventual percentages that would fall to his share. He was not a vicious man, but he had a grown-up daughter just ready for marriage in Normandy. His police captain's salary, however, was too small to enable him to get together a decent dowry for his prospective son-in-law.

So, rubbing his hands together, he said to the girl in a very kind voice:

'You lazy girl, why do you do such a degrading thing as to rummage among the garbage for food? Don't you know, you silly girl, that you can easily catch some very nasty disease in this way?'

The girl stood listening with her head drooping, while Julien said to himself that she looked like a wonderful but emaciated young panther, with her eyes burning with hunger.

And so, Lilian was taken to the kitchen to sweep the floor and rinse the vegetables with cold water. They stuffed her with good food to put flesh on her shoulders, and to swell out her blouse over her breasts which had grown lean with hunger. After this restorative regime, Mr. Denois ordered her to go and work in the bar. They put her behind the counter with the tall chairs and taught her how to fill the glasses with whiskey and gin and how to serve them to the guests. They robed her in a dress made out of some yellow-gold cloth that was transparent enough to show off the dazzling grace of her body and emphasize where her long lithesome legs, like those of a prairie gazelle, began. Immediately she attracted all the eyes of the select gentlemen, in uniform and out — the cream of the élite circle of Mr. Denois.

And the respective percentage would have duly started flowing, like a golden stream, into the pockets of Captain Julien, but for those flashing eyes of Lilian's. They glinted like the eyes of a real live panther— with a metallic brilliance that sent cold shudders down your back when you mentioned to her anything about the duties she had been intended to perform when she was taken to the bar. The girl stubbornly refused to listen to what the select men in uniform and in civilian clothes insistently demanded of her; and she did it not out of any moral scruples — no one had ever taught her any such scruples — but simply because, probably due to being quite incorrupt, she felt an insurmountable aversion to white men.

Then Julien gave orders for the porter to be arrested and said to Lilian:

'Your father will be able to save his dirty skin all right, but you'll have to give a little something to the bosses. Talk the matter over with your master, Mr. Denois.'

So Lilian had a talk with Mr. Denois. Two days later the owner of the Hôtel de Palme told her that the matter could indeed be settled on the payment of five thousand franks.

'Five thousand franks!' the girl sobbed. The sum was bigger than her salary for a year.

'Don't cry, we may be able to do something about it,' Mr. Denois comforted her. He took a promissory note out of his wallet, wrote the amount on it, then called two witnesses and made her put the mark of her thumb on the place for the signature of borrower.

On the following day the porter was set free. Loulou continued as before to fill the glasses of the customers in the bar with whiskey and gin and, as before, refused to listen to proposals in connection with the role she had been intended to perform when she was appointed to work in the bar.

Then came the liberation and Julien Lemaitre returned to his own country. As if gone with the *Haramatan,* the police and miltiary uniforms of the oppressors disappeared beyond the sands of the desert. Distinguished customers were much rarer in the bar. New visitors began to arrive — engineers, geologists, builders — white friends of the Mauritanians and Tuaregs, Benians and Berberians, men who had come to do business, who were men enough to be all eyes at Loulou's beauty, but decent enough not to insult her with proposals for paid love.

But one day Loulou came weeping to me.

'Has somebody insulted you?' I asked, as if I had been responsible for the morals and conduct of all the new white men. 'I'll break the rascal's neck!' I said to myself, feeling my blood hammering at my temples. It would have been no problem for me to give somebody a good hiding, for I was the picture of health then, my muscles like steel springs leaping into action under my skin. 'Has anyone hurt you?' I repeated my question, horrified: why should the girl's life be messed up just now? Loulou had managed to pull through safe and sound in the days when the shareholders in the Office du Niger and the officers and men of the forces, who were supposed to maintain law and order, and the gentlemen of the Société de Bamako had made prostitution in the cities the only accessible and promising source of living for many bronze and black girls — Tuaregs, Mauritanians, Benas. Why had she to mess up her life now, when prostitution was disappearing out of the lives of the people, as the shares and bonds held by the foreigners at the Office du Niger were vanishing out of the life of the country.

Loulou shook her head. Thank God! My suspicions melted away, vanished from my heart and I heaved a sigh of relief. And, perhaps, because I was so happy, I even felt like pinching her swarthy cheek, but did not do so, for she had come to my room and I knew what her attitude to white men had always been.

This is what had happened. Mr. Charles Denois had called her and had said to her:

'You, Lilian, owe me five thousand new French franks. Here's the promissory note. You remember we had to give that bribe to the chief of police to make him set your father at liberty. Those were hard times, indeed! But now you have to pay me back the money. Such is the law.'

Loulou did not know what the law was. She had kept quiet for a time, trying to imagine what these new five thousand franks meant. But she could not form any real idea, and there was only an indistinct feeling in her heart that she would never be able to get hold of such a sum, just as she would never be able to get hold of the sun and the stars, and as she would never be able to stop the majestic flow of the divine River Niger with her hands

'In two or three days, you'll have to settle this matter,' Mr. Denois had said.

Lilian had shrugged her shoulders. She had even laughed a peculiar laugh, because it was indeed both silly and funny to think that she would ever be able to stop the flow of the divine river with her two bare hands.

'If you can't,' Mr. Denois had said with a sympathetic smile, 'I shall have to sell the promissory note to somebody. And that somebody, if he is a bad man, will do whatever he wants with you, because five thousand franks are quite a big sum. For instance,' Mr. Denois had gone on to say, 'I shall very probably be forced to sell the promissory note to that Albert Cassive who has a sailing boat on the Niger and a night club in Bamako. He will probably take you to his night club and force you to work for him until you pay back the five thousand franks. When you borrow money, you have to pay it back. Such is the law.'

Lilian stood silent in front of me. Her stupefaction at the horrible thing that had pounced upon her like a steppe vulture, her inability to see any way out and her despair — this mixture of feelings seemed to have petrified her body. She was like a young, inexperienced panther which, through sheer foolishness, had fallen into the pit of a slyly prepared trap.

'Go now, Loulou,' I told her. 'Maybe I shall be able to think of some way of helping you. Don't tell Mr. Denois anything.'

Lilian is now driving a tip truck and, with her kinsmen, is transporting the parched yellow earth along the irrigation canal Nakra-Sosset. In a year or two there will be green meadows on the banks of this canal, cotton fields will be blossoming and fields of dense Mali millet will be waving in the breeze. But to make it possible for Lilian to be working on the canal now, I played a nice trick on Mr. Denois, which might well have cost me my life. This is what happened between Mr. Denois and me.

'Monsieur Denois,' I told him on the same day that

I had the talk with Lilian, 'do you know, if you're selling that promissory note of Loulou's, I'd like to buy it? I've taken a fancy to the girl, and I think that I could tame her and make her my mistress if you sold me the note. I can pay you the sum in dollars. You know, of course, that we foreign experts get paid in dollars.'

Charles Denois was highly pleased with my advantageous proposal.

'I am at your service,' he laughed, 'I'm quite ready to comply with your wish. The girl is surely worth that little sum.'

'Let's settle the matter this afternoon,' I replied. 'Let's meet at the South Star Pavilion, on the other bank of the Niger. I have a current account in dollars there.'

'Of course!' Mr. Denois said, stretching wide his arms. 'Just as you like! It's all the same to me where I shall go to get the money.' And he shook my hand: 'So long! Till this afternoon!'

I hired a small boat to hold two and pulled it out onto the bank, some hundred paces from the quay. First of all, I bored a hole in the bottom with an auger and then, after enlarging the hole, I stopped it tightly with oakum rags and yarn steeped in tar. I covered the wound with the wooden grid on the floor of the boat, so that at a given moment I could knock out the improvised peg with my heel. Then I took two shoulders of mutton out of my bag, cut them into pieces and fastened the pieces onto the keel of the boat.

At a few minutes to five I hauled the sail halfway against the wind and sailed out along the quay. I was exactly on time, because the tall figure of Mr. Denois, looking very much like a flamingo, was waiting for me on the deserted sand platform. He was dressed in a dazzling white cotton suit.

'Hallo, Monsieur Denois!' I waved a hand to him cheerfully.

'Are you going to row yourself?' he asked in surprise.

'Once for six years running I was national champion in yachting,' I smiled. 'Don't you worry at all. And then, to tell you the truth,' I went on talking, while I gave him my hand to help him climb into the boat, 'I've absolutely no faith in those Mauritanian boatmen. What do you think of them?'

I gave him no time to hesitate, for I pushed the wooden shell so suddenly off the bank that he nearly tumbled over into the water. He had hardly taken his seat, when I gave the rope such a hard pull that the sail, swollen by the wind, made a flapping sound under the pressure, like a heron's wing.

The stern left a churning trail in its wake on the muddy waters of the Niger. The sandy bank on the right receded rapidly, while the opposite bank was invisible in the quivering haze: only the crowns of the tallest palm-trees were outlined in the distance and looked like tiny ladies' umbrellas.

In about ten minutes our boat reached mid-channel. I loosened the sail, furled the upper part and the boat suddenly lost speed.

'Oh, that's much better,' Mr. Denois said. He had taken off his Panama hat and was pressing it hard against his chest. Drops of sweat had appeared on his forehead and bald scalp. 'Well, I see,' he said with a forced smile, 'you're a real yachtsman.'

'When Providence is on my side, I can work wonders, sir!' I said, and then added: 'I could easily make this worn-out old boat sail faster, but I'm afraid of the material it's made of. These boards are not only decayed, but they are as thin as an egg shell. Do you know, I can feel how they bend under my feet with the pressure of the water? Don't you notice it?'

'Sail more slowly!' Mr. Denois retorted laconically.

I loosened the ropes still more, and the boat began to sway lazily over the waves. The heel of my right shoe reached the improvised plug. I felt a lump rising in my throat and swallowed hard.

'Look, look!' Mr. Denois suddenly cried out. There was more horror in his voice than anger or surprise.

I looked at the water. On both sides of the boat, in front of the bow and behind the stern — on all sides — a host of disgusting, flat, pointed muzzles belonging to small Nigerian crocodiles were sticking out of the water. The reptiles, quite innocuous on the bank, but spiteful and treacherous in the water, were wheeling stubbornly around us, diving under the stern and coming out with gaping mouths and greedily glittering yellowish eyes.

'Oh, God!' Mr. Denois whispered horrified. His fingers had crumpled his Panama hat into a shapeless bundle of straw.

'It's the first time in my life that such a thing has happened to me,' I said gloomily. 'I've rowed over this river dozens of times, but I was never pursued by such a pack of brigands before. Not for anything in the world will I take you out sailing with me second time,' I added after a short pause.

'But why? Why are you putting the blame on me?' Denois asked.

"Anyhow, you're simply challenging Providence,' I replied, pushing out the plug of tarred rags and yarn with my heel. My throat was dry and I cried out so that he would hear me: 'Be careful you don't fall into the water or these friends will gnaw you to the bone. Look out!'

Our boat was rocking in the middle of the Niger. Both banks had disappeared in a milky haze that seemed immeasurably far from us, and even the crowns of those palm trees had vanished. The smooth, undulating surface of the water glistened like a mirror reflecting the sunlight, and in this mirror the grey muzzles and scaly backs of the pack of crocodiles stuck up out of the water.

Suddenly Mr. Denois jumped up, as if he had been stung by a bee, staring at me in horror, and then sank back onto his seat, pointing to his feet and shrieking in an insane voice:

'We're sinking!'

'Really?' I asked, looking down, too, although already for half a minute I had been aware of the water rising rapidly above my shoe-sole and covering the grid. 'This is really a rotten old shell,' I added, 'but, if it hadnt been for you, I'm sure there'd have been no trouble.'

'Don't talk nonsense, but do something, do something!' Mr. Denois cried out.

'What can I do?' I shrugged my shoulders 'Providence itself seems to be against you, and what can I do against Providence? It's you who have to do something, not I.'

'Oh, God!' Mr. Denois whispered, his lips blue with fear.

'Listen,' I said, bending over to him, 'if you don't get rid right now of that sin you're carrying in your pocket and which I had the idiotic idea of buying from you for five thousand francs —in five minutes we'll be done for! Do you get me? I can't stir a finger until you get rid of that sin! This isn't just bad luck, it's the very finger of God, don't you see?'

Denois looked about him. An endless expanse of turbid water, haze, desolation and the horrible frightening silence was all that he saw. Flat, toothed jaws and horny, scaly backs were swarming around us and above was the grey, ashy blue sky and the cruel, scorching sun.

'I'll block up the hole and then throw the dirty swine overboard to the crocodiles,' was the thought that flashed across my mind. I felt my lips cracking with thirst. But I sat motionless, having left everything to Providence.

Denois took out his wallet.

'What can I do?' he gasped.

'Tear the note to pieces and throw them to the crocodiles!' I gasped back.

In only a few seconds the sacrificial operation was performed: a few shreds of paper floated past and vanished in the wake of the boat.

About ten inches separated us from the surface of the water.

I knelt down, thrust my hand through the holes in the grating, got hold of the tarred peg and stopped the opening with it. Then, careful not to tip the boat to one side, I pulled out the ropes, and hoisted the sail. Although water-logged, the boat sailed forward, I took off my nylon shirt, made a sort of scoop and started bailing out the water. Denois did not stand by with his hands folded. He started bailing out the water with his Panama hat.

I turned the boat in the opposite direction — towards the right bank of the river. No matter how hard we bailed the water, its level in the boat remained the same, for it was seeping into the boat through the loosened peg. With such a load any quick turns or movements were dangerous and so I let the boat go with the current, which took us about two miles west of the town. Here the right bank of the river protruded out into the water, forming something like a small peninsula, overgrown with reeds and with tall, thick grass. When we were getting near to this peninsula and I saw the strip of white sand along the coast at about thirty steps to our right, I intentionally turned the boat sharply at almost ninety degrees, without loosening the ropes of the sail. The left side of the boat tipped down into the water, while the right side rose, and we found ourselves in the water, and all around us swarmed the crocodiles that began pursuing us.

Those Nigerian crocodiles, evil and ferocious in midstream, become as meek and harmless as carps when they are near the bank. But Mr. Denois was obviously ignorant of this metamorphosis in their character. After he was thrown from the boat into the water, he started screaming and letting out frantic, disconnected sounds like a madman. He splashed helplessly to right and left with his hands, sinking and disappearing, his strange behaviour obviously arousing the curiosity of the reptiles: they gathered round him in a circle, as passers-by often surround a funny character in the streets. Poor Mr. Denois, he did not know how to swim! But even if he had known — the horror of the dozen pointed muzzles which surrounded him had so paralyzed his brain that he looked more like a man in his dying agony than like a living and mentally sound shipwrecked person. I swam up to him, swung my left arm across his shoulders so that he should not hinder my movements, and a minute later, solemnly followed by the crocodiles, we dragged ourselves to the yellowish bank that was scorched and burnt by the sun.

When he recovered from the horror of what he had gone through, Mr. Denois stretched out his hand to me.

'You saved my life,' he said. His voice was soft, but solemn. 'I am infinitely obliged to you and infinitely thankful.'

I turned my head away so that he should not see the expression on my face. I could hardly refrain from laughing.

'I shall pay all the expenses for the boat,' he went on. 'I shall order half a dozen of the finest shirts for you from the best shirt firm in Paris....' He paused for a while and then heaved a sigh: 'I shall have a few very good things to tell Lilian about you. I hope it will help you.'

'Let's hope so!' I whispered.

Then suddenly I felt somehow painfully sad. Without any transition, my joy gave way to a feeling of terrible oppression, of profound sadness without any cause. That does happen sometimes! After a great tension in gambling, for instance, when you have staked everything, even your head, on one number or one suit.

The sun was sinking in the west and the tops of the reeds shone above our heads in a reddish glow.

The next day I left for my district — between the jungle and the boundless stretches of pampas, grown yellow and dry with the drought. When I got back two months later, the new manager of the Hôtel de Palme told me that Lilian was attending a truck driver's course in Bamako. Charles Denois had sold his hotel to the Office du Niger, to the new Office du Niger, which was run now by the Mali state.

I recall all this and feel well. I am slowly sipping my 'cocktail' and feel a mild warmth spreading through my emaciated body. I am like an old man warming his hands on the beautiful things that have been in his life, an old man who, because of his advanced years, has become deaf and mute to the present. But I am neither deaf nor mute to the present, because my years are not so very many. I see, for instance, that young, dark-brown little panther, Loulou's successor, and say to myself that there are at least a thousand things which you are sorry to leave in parting with life. Through the shop window I see how Louis, the pharmacist, drags his sandalled feet across the street on the soft heated asphalt. He walks as if he is carrying the cross of the Crucifixion on his shoulders. To hell with such men with their round shoulders and cissy souls! They're not to my taste — they turn my stomach.

Louis sits in front of me with a guilty look in his eyes.

'If I stay here, those in the Metropolis will surely put my name on the black list of disloyal citizens. If I go back, they'll call me to account for sympathizing with the Sudanese Union and will make me pay for it: they'll leave me unemployed, shuttle me from one office to another, or give me a miserable post in some remote little town. I can't even dream of a pharmacy of my own! Where could I find the money to buy myself a license?'

I pretend to be wrapped in thought and do not answer his question.

He is silent, puffing at his cigarette. His fingers and hands are white and softish, too pale for a man living in the tropics.

'Do you know,' says Louis trying to twist his lips into a smile. My Yvette left me. You know her, don't you?'

I nod my head. Many of us knew *his* Yvette, and knew her in the right way, as men. She was a swarthy Mauritanian beauty, insatiable for love, jewels and embroidered finery. She lived in his rooms, but when he was at work in the pharmacy, received every white man there who smiled up at her from the street, if she found him good-looking and well dressed. She received him with open arms and without reservations at all, but on seeing him off never failed to ask for a *pourboire.*

She was greedy for sweets and sugared fruit which she bought continually, always putting aside a few for Louis.

There were thousands of such Yvettes, and it is not worth while being sad for any of them!

'I had got so accustomed to having her around!' Louis sighs. 'She was like a big child, used to be wayward and giddy and used to do a lot of silly things.' He pauses for awhile, then waves his hand. 'She ran away after a Rumanian. Maybe you know him — he's an engineer, a prospector for oil.'

I tell him that I know no Rumanian and no prospector for oil. Louis begs to be excused. He thinks that we, experts, know each other — we are all communists, aren't we? I shrug my shoulders: there are communists everywhere. Even on the Solomon Islands, on the Sandwich Islands, on the Islands of Samoa. Everywhere. But I do not know that prospector for oil.

'She ran away with him!' Louis repeats.

'And so what!' I laugh.

Louis makes an attempt to crack a joke.

'Don't you think she'll get soaked in the smell of petrol, poor thing?'

'The devil take you!' I say. 'Didn't you set out for the river a while ago? Why didn't you drown yourself?'

Louis takes a few long pulls at his cigarette, then crushes it in the ash tray without finishing it.

'I was frightened by the crocodiles,' he says.

'You were quite wrong, my dear fellow, to get the wind up! The crocodiles will start nibbling at you after you've stopped conculsing in the water, in other words. after you are half dead.'

'You mean that I'll not feel their teeth?'

'I can guarantee that.'

Louis is silent for a while, then gulps down his whiskey at one go.

'As a matter of fact, that's a solution,' he says. He looks at me with his sad, effeminate eyes and asks: 'There isn't any other alternative, is there?'

The man is a perfect bore. I despise him. I have always despised him, both before I met him and after I chanced to get to know him. I cannot stand people of his mental pattern.

'There is no other alternative,' I reply. 'Go and get drowned while there is still time. Or take a ticket to Bamako and from there leave straight for Marseilles. In the first case you'll be torn to shreds by the crocodiles, in the second — by the deputy chiefs at the Ministry of Public Health in Paris.'

'You're awfully kind,' Louis said smiling sadly, and offers me his hand.

He takes two or three steps between the tables and turns round.

'By the way, do you take those pills which I made up for you?'

'Regularly,' I say, lying to him.

'They will surely help you,' says Louis.

The same day, 12 o'clock at noon

I am lying in my green boxlike room and am thinking again of Lilian. She is transporting parched yellow earth along the bed of the canal Nakri-Sosset. She is rushing along in her tip-truck, leaving a cloud, a gigantic trail of churning dust in her wake. I feel well when I think about Lilian, the tip-truck, the irrigation canal Nakri-Sosset. I recall the incident with the boat and ask myself: what if Charles Denois had not torn up that promissory note? Or if he had definitely refused to tear it to pieces?

Whenever I think about it, I experience a definite and exceedingly unpleasant feeling. The Nigerian crocodiles are meek and tame, but only when they are lying stretched out on the sand or are close to the shore. If the instinct for life in Mr. Denois had not asserted itself at the right moment (I had built up my stratagem for Lilian's salvation on this instinct), I should have felt the teeth of the reptiles, should surely have felt them before having swallowed enough water to lose consciousness. Had I taken this risk into account? If I say 'yes', all sensible people will take me for an adventurer, and if I say 'no' they will call me a naive fool. But I myself do not know what I am, and do not need to know. At that moment I was thinking about Lilian, and that a young life had to be saved. That was all.

THE DANCE OF THE MILLET WITH THE WINDS

June 2, 5 o'clock in the afternoon

The village in which Louis Philippe lives is situated eighty kilometres south-east of the town, on the very border between the jungle and the flat and boundless steppe of pampas-grass. On the south side is one of the tributaries of the Niger, deep during the tropical rains, like the Maritsa River in Bulgaria. This tributary cuts across the protruding part of the jungle, the one that comes out like the segment of an arc into the prairie and in the dry season, which lasts for seven or eight months, quenches the unbearable thirst of thousands of quadrupeds: village cattle, beasts from the shady forests, and the fleet-footed inhabitants of the pampas. The graceful flamingos, the diligent secretary-birds, ibises and other birds large and small, gaily coloured like the embroidered 'boubous' of the beauties of the Bambara tribe — all this many-tribed feathered world lives and finds hospitality here, in the flooded areas, both for itself and its offsprings.

I was brought here by the jeep belonging to the tractor centre. The chauffeur, a swarthy and talkative Mauritanian, was in a hurry to go somewhere (he had a fiancée in the neighbouring village, about twenty miles from Louis Philippe's village) and that is why I let him go away at once.

It was late in the afternoon and the village looked desolate.

The village consisted of some fifteen cone-shaped

cabins, arranged in four concentric circles, each one at about fifteen paces from the other. The central circle formed a small square. In the centre of the square rose the big cabin of the chieftain; the four smaller cabins of his wives squatted around it like ducks. The cabins and their courtyards, the streets like concentric ribbons — all this little world of hedges and clay and yellow straw lived under the leafy branches of the blessed and ever green mango tree. The yard of Louis Philippe, the only Roman Catholic in the village (but as much a Roman Catholic as, for instance, I was a Brahmin) lay in the outermost peripheral concentric circle of cabins, near the dark and silent jungles. The jungle was there at two throws of a stone from it, or at a shot of his old well-worn gun.

For his father, while he was still in his prime, this distance was only two throws of a thin bamboo lance. From his yard he used to shoot with his bow at the chimpanzees that invaded his mangoes in big crowds during the dry season. Now only chidren and teenagers played with lances and bows, and real men went to hunt with percussion guns or with old scrap single barrel guns which the second-hand dealers in the towns, most of them Mauritanians, sold usually for two sacks of husked rice. This is a high price in view of the long and sometimes impassable roads leading to the towns, but a Bambara pays it without grumbling, because the possession of a hunting gun (a percussion gun or a long thin rifle, or a combination of the two, or anything that shoots) was a question of honour and dignity. Well, from Louis Philippe's yard to the jungle the distance was some eighty paces — a desert space, with tough scrub and green bamboo-like ferns here and there and covered from end to end with rough rank grass, growing as tall as a man. It was dangerous to cross this space barefoot, because it was teeming with snakes, especially during the hot season.

In his yard Louis Philippe had two cabins — woven out of twigs, plastered on the outside with mud, with pointed cone-shaped roofs, and thatched all over with a layer of dry hay half a yard thick. He lived in the larger cabin with his wife, Sana, a Mohammedan, and his daughter, Silvestra, almost six feet tall and seventeen years old, lived in the smaller one. When she had committed some small sin and wanted absolution, Silvestra became a fanatic Roman Catholic and ran to the Catholic priest in the neighbouring village to make her confession. But when the Fertility Festival was celebrated in connection with the cultivation of rice and millet, the animistic beliefs of her distant and merry ancestors awoke in her heart, beliefs which did not at all coincide with the strict commandments of the Koran. But here, between the jungle and the pampas no one bothered to observe any commandments and religious rules. Bambara, Tuaregs, Bena — all had their own customs and laws, best suited to their natural surroundings, climate, and instinct for the continuation of the race. All this was mechanically attached either to the cult of Mohammed, or to the cult of the Christian Virgin, interfused with the animistic beliefs of ancestors living on in good and bad spirits. This mixture of cults made it possible for Silvestra of the tropics to live according to her natural inclinations and her own nature, as all the fellow-villagers of Louis Philippe, the Roman Catholic, and all friends of Sana, the Mohammedan, lived. The Roman Catholic priests and Mohammedan hodjas in the interior of the country wherever you encountered them, had long since given up demanding from the 'believers' anything that was incompatible with their natural inclinations, with their age-old customs and the natural laws of life.

Neither the Tuaregs nor the Bambara ever locked their houses. You rarely saw a lock on any villager's house. Louis Philippe would not have hesitated to come out against a two-horned rhinoceros with his pitiful percussion gun, but no one could ever have made him open another man's door.

I gave a light push to the door and crossed the threshold. When my eyes got used to the half-darkness, I examined the well-known interior of the cabin, discovering nothing new, no change, in it. In fact I had not expected to find any particular changes, because in

the houses of the Tuaregs even years do not bring changes, let alone a few weeks of a mere month! I was looking, as a matter of fact, for what I needed and I found it very soon. I discovered it in one of the corners (if you could talk of corners in this big round room) among half a dozen rice sacks, full and half-full of rice and millet and on which all kinds of large, medium-sized and small gourds were piled — some carved and some not, some painted and some smooth, all quite fresh and obviously recently picked from the gourd-field. Out of this muddle I picked up the thing I needed — a comfortable hammock to sleep in, made of tough grass-stalks that were finished off at both ends with pieces of pitch black wood. The search cost me a pretty big effort: my knees shook and cold sweat had broken out on my forehead.

In the centre of the cabin there was a sort of platform, built of clay. It was covered with bast-mats and decorated at the corners with antelope hides. This platform, about fifteen inches from the ground, served as the bed on which Sana and Louis Philippe slept. Although I knew how inviolable the place was, I doubled up my legs and sat down at one end of the mats: there were no chairs in the hut and I had to sit down because my head was swimming.

I sat so for a minute or two, listening to the beating of my heart. My heart seemed to be squeaking, contracting with difficulty and with still greater difficulty pushing out the blood. The poison of that thorn was going on with its work, there was no doubt about it.

But I did not want to think of that poison. I examined the walls of the hut, as if I had come in here for the first time. I examined them with great interest. I was most struck with the dozens of pairs of horns stuck and fastened into the grey clay plaster by means of crude hooks. There were straight, curved, and wavy horns, and horns as smooth as bayonets — all kinds of horns, of antelopes, gazelles and goats. Stretched hides and skins hung from the hooks: velvety skins of black panthers, mottled skins with yellow and brown spots;

and other skins with bigger white patches — surely leopards'. Eyeless stuffed heads of chimpanzees, of a water buffalo, of a two-horned rhinoceros grinned among the skins. In front of Sana's small, primitive loom there was a little rug, woven in gaily coloured wool. A piece of a looking-glass flashed in the centre of this rug, attached to it with narrow straps of yellow bast. A roughly made long, low wooden chest, covered with a ragged buffalo hide served as the weaver's stool. Probably Sana's festive dresses were tucked away in it, and perhaps also the shot and cartridges for Louis Philippe's percussion gun. The gun of this passionate huntsman hung on its leather strap from a tremendous pale-yellowish elephant tusk on the central pillar that supported the cabin.

I remembered our last shooting expedition together and looked with aversion at his cursed gun. If the flint had not failed to ignite the powder at that crucial moment, matters would probably have taken quite a different course, and I should not have come upon that fatal thorn. But had the gun been only to blame for the misfortune?

After I had rested for a while, I flung the hammock over my shoulder and went out.

I am now lying in the thick shade of two mango trees. I don't see even the tiniest gleam of sky, above my head there is an impenetrable sea of green leafage. Here and there in the green flash yellow, yellow-pink, and ochre spots. I have only to stretch out my hand to take them. They are fruit — the succulent and aromatic fruit of the mango. In colour and taste they are a wonderful combination of peach, quince and yellow plum. I have only to reach out my hand to pick a peach, quince, and juicy yellow plum. But I cannot stretch out my hand. I do not want to move even the fingers of my hand. I am lying between eternities — the jungle and the pampas. I have a strong desire to listen to the language of these two eternities, to go deep into it, to understand it .... What a silence! You can go mad in such a silence, you can grab your new carbine and blow out your brains .... Provided you can bring yourself to do one thing — to stir just a finger. Because the carbine has a trigger which must be pressed by a finger.

The same day, late in the evening

I could hardly have slept for more than an hour. When I opened my eyes the air around me looked reddish: the sun was setting beyond the prairie.

When the sun sets, the sky above this world of forest, plain, and swamp becomes like an arched roof of sparkling rubies. A bright ruddy glow is reflected under the vault, under the bulging arch, as if invisible bellows were forming gigantic red-hot pieces of shining steel. In this brief interval between day and night a rosy sea seems to inundate the earth — a stimulating, refreshing rosiness, maybe because at this hour the world always awakes dazed by a thirst for life. Herds of antelope run to the rivers and flooded areas; kudus, with long-spiral horns and short tails like clubs; beiza goats with sad muzzles and curving horns like those of our own goats; gnus — queer creatures with the body of a horse, wonderful long tails reaching down to the ground, with moustached ox-like muzzles and down-curved horns. Thirsty zebras, elephants and water buffaloes rush to the rivers and watering places. Monkeys clamour, jumping about in the branches of gigantic trees, hollow with age. They grin senselessly, waving their hands and twisting their tails into nooses. Panthers come out of their shady dens, purring like huge cats and whetting their claws on the rough bark of the decaying trunks of trees. A little apart from the tumult at the fords, thoughtful marabous stand on one leg on a stone that is still warm and that has been polished bright by the water. They look as if they were sunk in thought but they are in fact carefully watching the shallows before them in order to round off their plentiful supper with a fat little fish.

The village, too, with the peaked cabins and the silent and deserted yards and gardens comes to life in this cool evening pinkness. A clamour of tongues, such as can be heard only at the liveliest of our fairs can be heard coming from the yards, filling the streets, and rising up to the sky. The owners of the cabins have come back from the rice-field, from the great millet plot and from the vegetable gardens. The rice, the millet and the vegetables are owned in common by the whole village, by all, and every mouth receives its proper share of rice, millet and vegetables. Everyone has done his bit on the land according to his strength and possibilities and all are entitled to appease their hunger, although all are not equally hungry. 'It's better that someone has too much than everyone too little,' the chieftain says. 'When there is a surplus of rice, the people are never sad, but when there isn't enough, the people lose their desire to laugh.' In these parts laughter is the measure of economic well-being. And as the children are not counted as 'mouths', the village assigns a plot of land to every mother to sow with millet and rice, to cultivate herself for her own needs, so that her children are well fed and laugh, without being a drain on their parents' share of food and so undermining their laughter.

'And what about the loafers?' I once asked Nunu Nhwama, the chieftain of the village, 'the idlers and dodgers?'

He stroked his long beard, cast a condescending look at me and chuckled softly:

'You grow lazy when you put on fat, and the fat on your body comes mostly from idleness. Isn't that so? That's why we take care that our people do not stay idle. But there are days when they have nothing to do. Then we send them to the mothers' plots of land to lend them a hand. Or else we take out the whole village, with a dozen tamtams marching at the head, to the common state land. We are working to supply our soldiers with greater quantities of food and to store more grain in the state granaries. This work is pleasant and we like it very much. The state farms have farm machinery, and our people are crazy about it. They are ready to take half a day's journey, just to look

at it. Now and then we arrange a big hunt. We call the young men, divide them up into chasing parties, and in the evenings the women roast shoulders of kudu and baiza goat over the fire. If the hunters kill a dangerous beast, we make a big fire in the square and celebrate. The boys and girls dance, and the older people smoke their pipes by the fire, mapping out tomorrow's work. There is no room for idleness, as you see, and you will seldom find people who have grown fat from idleness among us. But if an idler does make his appearance, and his idleness is not because of sickness but is just a bad trait in his character, and if he tries to hide his laziness with sly tricks, we proceed with him just as we do with any woman who, we know, is going about with other men against her husband's will. We banish such a woman from the village, giving her a bag of rice for the trip. We let her go to the towns and the ports along the Niger to look for her happiness there! We don't give an idle slyboots a grain of rice for his journey. We chase him away into the jungle or steppe, because such a man is of no use to the people. Then, if he comes back a few days after, he comes back without his laziness, and starts working like the rest of us, without his tricks, because he has seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears the law of the jungle and the rules of the steppe. And we, the elders, after we have made sure that he has grown wiser, forget his former conduct: we make room for him by the fire, and let him smoke his pipe with us and eat with us of the festive ram.'

Sana was husking rice in the yard, expertly throwing the pestle high up into the air. The pestle was a smooth wooden rod as tall as herself with a rounded end. Every time the rod fell into the deep mortar full of rice, she cried at the top of her voice, like a heron fallen into a spell of rapture. At the same time she swung her body about rhythmically, twisting her shoulders and jerking her head. The same ritual was performed in the same manner in the yard next door, in the yards across the way, everywhere in the village —

ritual shouts and songs filled the air. Silvestra, graceful and over six foot tall, was keeping pace with her mother, peeling onions and cutting cucumbers with a kitchen knife which you could have slaughtered a boar with. She danced from one foot to the other, twisting her waist and singing a song that was so merry that she herself was splitting her sides with laughter. There were similar Silvestras in almost every yard, so that along with the heron cries, fireworks of joyous girls' songs flew up into the sky. This choir was accompanied by the low shouts of the men who were kindling the home fires, by the lowing of oxen from the village cattle-shed and the bleating of rams. These people's happiness was primitive, warming your soul as a fire, eternal and primitive, kindled in the open warms the frozen hands of a wandering hunter.

We chatted, Louis and I, about this and that, smoking. From time to time he cast furtive glances at me, with an anxious expression in his eyes, and I knew that his heart was writhing in pain. How many days more did he think I would live? Or maybe he felt guilty for my misfortune?

At one moment he disappeared from the yard and I went up to Silvestra.

'You've grown very thin,' she said, examining me with critical eyes.

'I'm only worth throwing to the dogs now,' I replied.

'You killed a lion,' Silvestra smiled. 'All victors are handsome!'

'Even when they grow thin like steppe hyenas?'

'They're always handsome,' she said.

'And you, would you marry me?'

Her teeth shone, and she smiled!

'It isn't right of you to be joking in this way. Victors don't joke like that.'

I went and sat down in my former place and lit a cigarette.

Louis Philippe came back soon. Nunu Nhwama strode in front of him in a white cloak and with an air of importance, austere and absorbed in his thoughts. We exchanged greetings according to custom and

then he sat down on the mat with his legs crossed, looking fixedly at me.

'We love you as a friend and a brother,' the chieftain began.

I nodded. Silvestra was looking at me with eyes which seemed to say: 'After all, why shouldn't I get married to you?' But they said that without enthusiasm even sadly, so I turned my head away from her.

'You talk with us like a friend and brother,' Nunu Nhwama went on softly and in an even tone. 'You eat with us from our rice, drink milk with us from our gourds, shoot at the lion to save our cattle from its teeth.'

'Nunu Nhwama,' I said, 'all these words are superfluous.'

The old man heaved a sigh and paused for a while. 'A month ago Silvestra looked at me in a different way,' I said to myself and laughed. 'Not only did she look in a different way at me, but she pretended not to notice it when I used to put my arm around her waist.'

The old man sighed again.

'Actually, did I ever put my arm around her waist, or just thought of doing it?' I asked myself.

'You ought to have followed my advice,' Nunu Nhwama said, 'and used the herbs I gave you. If you had followed my advice your heart would be thirsting for the hunt now, your eyes would be yearning for the jungle, and your mouth would be laughing the laughter of a satiated and carefree young man.'

'Don't you see, Nunu Nhwama, that I am in good cheer and laughing?' I replied.

'Strong men laugh even when they're very sad,' the old man remarked softly, thrusting his fingers into his beard. 'When I was young, I remember, we had a hunter in our tribe whose name was Wai. He was one head taller than you, and in his cabin he had a lion's skin, three panthers' skins and as many antelope skins, as a very strong man can carry on his back. At that time we hunted with arrows and lances and his hunting trophies were well deserved, won thanks to his skill and strength, the way a man wins such trophies. He was in every way successful and lived in satiety. The two most beautiful women in the village were his. But he always went about sullen and angry about something, never smiling, and if his character had not been generous and gentle, we should have treated him like a stranger, like a disagreeable foreigner. But it happened that a leopard tore off his right arm — that happened during a big hunt — tore it off from the shoulder. When the poor fellow came out of his cabin a month later, we all surrounded him with compassionate faces, for he was a crippled man and no good lay in store for him. We stood round him, sighing as he stared coldly at us. We kept quiet for a while, and then, I swear by Mohammed and by all good and evil spirits of the jungle and the steppes, he laughed so merrily, that hosts of the worst and most greedy ants seemed to be creeping dawn our backs; those ants which tear off your flesh when they sting you. But the man was laughing and, however strange it may seem to you, he was laughing sincerely, as we all laugh when we are merry. A month later Wai was left with only one wife — the younger one had left him. There was such a custom in our tribe; when a man was unable to feed his family, because of wounds he had got in war or in the hunt, his wives left him, each one returning with her children to her family, until he recovered and was able to wield the bow again and to guard his sheep against beasts of prey. In Wai's case of course, there was no hope of recovery, because we all know that no one can get a new arm after his arm has been torn off from the shoulder. So, he remained to live alone in his cabin. Whenever anybody has to spend a great part of his life in solitude, he inevitably acquires the character of the lone elephants: he becomes evil, spiteful and disagreeable, both to the members of his family and to others.

'But in Wai's case just the opposite happened.

'No one ever saw him sullen — he laughed, going about erect as a palm tree and jesting with his former fellow huntsmen whenever he met them. And the weaker he grew from lack of food, the oftener we heard him sing and whistle merrily to the birds pecking the mango fruit in his deserted yard. True, when we happened to kill larger game or slaughtered a ram, we used to bring him a part of it and, although that did not happen very often, we did not forget him altogether. At first he used to accept our gifts shyly, but later he refused them and began turning us away, saying that the mango fruit were quite enough for him and that he felt a pain in his intestines whenever he even looked at meat. We did not believe him, for we knew that he was lying, but we did not insist. We said we did not want him to have a pain in his intestines; and pretending to believe him, took the meat to our own cabins. A year went by in that way, and he grew quite thin, thinner even than you. But he went on singing, laughing and whistling to the birds, as if he had had the most beautiful of the most beautiful of our women in his cabin, and on his table — a warm shoulder of ram, just roasted.

'Wai was a strong man, indeed! Once he set out for the jungle, disappeared into its shadows, and that was the end of him, we never saw him again. But although five decades have passed since then, I seem even now to hear his voice, marching into the jungle and singing merrily as if he had been going to his betrothal. In his left hand he carried a lance, but his arm had become as thin as the bamboo rod on his lance! His skin was stretched tight over his ribs, his backbone was like a dry roof. Yet he walked straight, and you wondered where he got that strength from and his almighty spirit.

"That is how I remember Wai, the huntsman. Strong men are not easily forgotten, they live on through the years in men's memories.

'If such a misfortune befell a man now, it would not be such a big calamity. We have enough cattle, and even if we are not oversatiated with meat, we cannot say that we are hungry. We have plenty of rice and millet! We should manage to feed any poor fellow who got hurt, and neither would he feel guilty of being a burden to the rest of us, nor should we feel the burden of it. But those years were hard — your white brothers had pushed us back into the wildest places: into the jungle, among the lions and panthers, into the prairie among the snakes, into the waterless places where even birds did not fly. In those days a man with both his arms found it hard to make a living, let alone a cripple!

'But Wai was a strong man and a proud one, for he had killed a lion. And he who kills a lion never stretches out his hand, and never accepts alms. Wai had a stern face, but his heart was good. He did not want to be a burden to us, because he knew our poverty. That is why he took to the jungle — to free us from the trouble of caring for him and not to hurt our hearts with the sight of his weak and crippled body. He was a strong man, indeed. Only the strongest of the strong can laugh when a great misfortune befalls them, a misfortune that costs them their lives....'

It had begun to grow dark. When the rosy glow melts away into the short-lived blue dusk, night sets in rapidly and suddenly, as suddenly as the waters of the Niger come during the rainy season.

Nunu Nhwama got up, put his hand on my forehead as if trying to find out whether I was not burning already in the flames of tropical fever. But I knew that my forehead was cool as were my hands, my feet and my lips. This touch of the old man's hand seemed to carry me away into many dead decades of the past, into a dead world of memories and shadows. And who knows why that same thought began haunting my mind again: it could, nevertheless, just so happen that the poison would fail to carry the job through to the bitter end... now couldn't it? Something in my heart revolted against the shadows, against the touch of this old man's hand, which already smelt of the earth.

'Leave me alone, Nunu Nhwama,' I said.

'Your blood has to be made to dance,' Nunu Nhwama said thoughtfully. He seemed not to have heard my words. 'Your blood has to be made to dance at any price,' he repeated.

Here, between the jungle and the pampas, the words of the chieftain have the force of law. When Nunu Nhwama orders a big ceremonious fire to be kindled in the square, no one of the Tuaregs protests, but all bring

kindling and wood and do it with a will, because they know that delicious fat rams will be roasted on a spit above the embers, that Silvestra and her friends will be serving them gourds of thick ale that can make the sparks fly from their eyes.

The feast in the square lasted till midnight. When the rams had been eaten up and gnawed to the bone and the ale had been drunk, Nunu Nhwama called the tamtam players. The six of them lined up in a semicircle opposite the fire with their cone-shaped instruments, and the chieftain nodded to them. The tamtam sticks beat on the taut skins, a rain of sound fell all around, a whirlwind of sound, and then the jungle, the pampas, thousands of years, the divine Niger, all seemed to swoop down on us, tearing us away from the world. The tamtam — it carries man back to his original homeland, the depth of time, the sweep of eternal motion, it calls forth what is elemental and eternal in life — the call of the blood maybe....

The dances started. Tall, slim men present a hunt, and not just any hunt, but a risky hunt, a royal game with death: the pursuit of a lion. Nunu Nhwama rises solemnly pointing towards me with his finger. His finger is greasy with the fat of the ram, shining in the light of the fire like the rotten tooth of an old beast. Louis Philippe, beating his chest with his fist, shouts out the battle cry of the Tuaregs at the top of his voice. Hundreds of voices take up the cry and the yellow-starred night seems to start, pierced with the sound, while the flames seem to lick its skirts, shrouding the terrible darkness of its deserted forests and plains. This is an ovation, warm and solemn, in my honour, so I rise to my feet. At this moment Nunu Nhwama has forgotten that he is a Moslem — he is twisting his long, withered body in a terrible manner, waving his arms as if he were being attacked by a thousand ghosts, whispering incantations and rolling his eyes at me. He calls the good spirits of his ancestors, praying to them to take me under their protection, to make the poison which has penetrated into my veins harmless and give me a hundred years of life. While he was calling the spirits of his ancestors, the tamtams conversed in a mysterious way with the yellow stars above our heads, with the neighbouring galaxies and with the whole world.

The ovations in my honour and the prayers for my longevity came to an end — and the dances continued. But Nunu Nhwama's dark, intelligent eyes did not seem to be satisfied with the 'dance' of my blood which had grown cold. He called Silvestra, leaning over to her and whispering something in her ear, and she in turn, with a conspiratorial air, whispered something into the ears of the musicians.

'Now you will see the dance of the millet with the winds,' Nunu Nhwama smiled mysteriously. 'Our girls dance it only once a year, on the night before the Fertility Festival. It's then that the betrothals take place, and the weddings take place at the beginning of the rainy season. But, to cheer up your soul, I ordered the most beautiful of our girls to perform the dance especially for you.'

The tamtams burst forth chantingly, appealingly. This was the call of the blood. The moist south-west wind, coming from the distant and invisible ocean, was blowing in our direction. I listened to the tamtams and felt the life-giving breath of the coming winds. And that thought (that the poison might after all fail to produce its final effect) again crossed my mind, but I paid no attention to it, because I had got used to it. Nine girls came out to the front before the fire and the first one ,their leader, was Silvestra. The girls came out in the same way as they waded through the rice fields during the hottest days. But instead of gay coloured clothes round their waists, they wore bunches of ostrich feathers.

The musicians accelerated the mad rhythm of their tamtams, each of the girls whirled about in a frenzied whirlwind of a dance, the ostrich feathers flying around them like small wings calling to you....

It is midnight. I am lying in my hammock, but I still feel Silvestra's burning breath on my lips and the moist coolness of her body.

The roast rams, thick ale, the dance of the millet with the winds, all blessed by the chieftain Nunu Nhwama, and the huge fires that flamed up here and there among the cabins extinguished the yellow stars, pushing away the darkness to the remotest parts of the village. The tamtam ruled the world, putting back time thousands of years.

IN THE HOME COUNTRY

June 3, a little after midnight

It was to Nunu Nhwama that I owed that joyful night. In his youth Nunu Nhwama had killed lions and leopards, panthers and countless numbers of horned game; with his club he had bashed in the head of one of the white bosses, a man more cruel than the spotted leopard and greedier for girls than the hairy gorilla in the jungle. Nunu Nhwama was a strong man and a great hunter. Even now, at the age of eighty, he could break the skull of a slaughtered ram by just pressing hard on it with his thumb, and suck out its brain to the last morsel. With one glance of his eyes he could make the Tuaregs scurry away and hide in their cabins, as the kudus hide in the bushes of the prairie when the maned king of the beasts suddenly appears before them; and with one wave of his hand he could change age-old customs, and celebrate, for instance, Fertility Day at quite an inopportune moment, at a time, say, between the dry season and the rains. Such a powerful man was Nunu Nhwama. Yet this man was saddened at the sight of my weak, emaciated appearance, and was not ashamed of his sadness, but placed his hand on my forehead, so that I should feel the pain that was gnawing at his heart through its calloused skin. And he told me the story of Wai the huntsman to comfort me, and shifted Fertility Day half a season ahead to warm up my blood with the fires, the ale, and the ritual dances of the Tuareg tribe. It was for my sake that the great huntsman Nunu Nhwama, the chieftain and elder, did all this, and yet I was only a foreigner, a white man and stranger in those parts.

In thinking of this strength, which did not harden the great man's heart, and of the power of the man, who with fatherly solicitude put his hand on a sick man's forehead, I remembered another night, just as delightful, which I had spent two decades earlier in my native country.

I half-close my eyes, and see the Balkan Mountains smiling enrapturingly at me, veiled in the lilac dusk, with curly flimsy little clouds above them, and in the forests the green glades, the tall beech trees, the limpid streams and fragrant crane's bill. At a spot where their sunny southern slopes rise up into a hump and then descend steeply down into a deep valley, overgrown with trees, which separates the high mountains from the hilly plain on the other side, at that spot there is always water, bubbling along from early spring to St Nicholas Day in December. It is neither a river, this water, nor a stream, but a rivulet which our people call Marina Bara. In my opinion it is wrong to call it by this name, because the word 'bara' in Bulgarian means stagnant water, dull and green with pond scum, whereas our rivulet is swift and fleet, leaping from stone to stone, limpid as molten glass. But it was given that name in the past and who knows why the name has stuck to it, even till now. The rivulet rises under a vault of dark granite in a place called Koupitê about one mile west of the village. This natural tunnel under which the rivulet rises, leads into the depths of the mountain — for some distance you can creep along by its walls parallel to the rivulet, but this venture calls for strong nerves, strength and experience and is not everybody's cup of tea. After collecting the waters of a few mountain brooks and rills, the Marina Bara dashes headlong down towards the entrance to the deep valley. Small and jumpy as it is, it is like a daintly little doe fleeing from some fierce lone wolf and galloping at random across glades and valleys to save her skin from the teeth of the wolf.

Just at the entrance to the valley my father's primitive water-mill lay in ambush for the rivulet. It gripped hold of it greedily in its wooden mill-race, hurling it with all its might down onto the blades of the wooden wheel. The waterfall below roared and thundred, churning up foam like a veritable whirlpool. What a pleasure it was to stand in this whirlpool, to feel the mad splashes of the wheel! It wasn't everybody who could do it, nor could everybody pluck up courage to stand there in the whirlpool.

My father had inherited this miserable little flour mill from my grandfather, and thought of it only after they had dismissed him from his job as a teacher in the '30s. To this day I don't know what profit he could have got out of it, because the wealthy farmers ground their wheat at the roller-mill at the other end of the village, and only the poorest peasants, the sharecroppers, came to my father's mill. I remember them, walking behind their donkeys, never in a hurry, trudging along the path that wound its way between the beeches, barefooted, their sheepskin caps pulled down over their eyes. Their bags, as soft as punctured water-skins because they were half empty, contained corn and corn-cobs, and wheat mixed with rye. Such was the grist they brought, poor stuff, but the stones ground it diligently and carefully, and while the clapper raised hell, the mill was filled with the smell of warm, well-baked corn-cake.

Our house, at the upper end of the village near the forest, two storeyed and smiling, with pots of stork's bill on the window sills and a small garden with nasturtiums and hollyhocks in front, seems to be standing before me. I stand behind the low fence made of loppings as if waiting to hear my mother's soft, warm voice coming from the house. She is a little sad and a little tired, like all women who have one big headache in their lives — to bear their husband's despotism with patience.

The lean, raw-boned man standing in the porch, is

my father. He looks at me with his cold, bluish eyes, and his gaze is impassive, preoccupied; he does not seem to notice me or, if he does, the attention which he pays to me can in no case be greater than a grain of wheat. He has the eyes of a man looking into the distance, absorbed in his thoughts about something important, something big. For, when you look into the distance, pondering over important things you do not usually notice ordinary, everyday things — ordinary people, for instance, with ordinary, everyday joys and sorrows. That is why the man standing in the porch does not notice me, though the whole of me is reflected in his eyes — and I see my own image mirrored in them as I should be able to see it reflected in deep, dark-blue waters.

And there is that small boy, the plump one, the son of the pert-nosed beauty who lived on the attic floor. He is standing in front of me, in my room, for he has come to show me something, or to ask me something, but I look at him almost without noticing him, because I am thinking about the large copper deposits in the mountains, which I have set my mind on discovering for the people, so that they can be happy.

And then again I see my fellow-tenant there, the girl chemist. We used to kiss each other and were friends, but it so happened that I did not remember the name of the factory in which she was working as laboratory assistant, and that hurt her feelings. Yet, she should not have got huffy because at that time I was terribly worried — I was trying to prove my hypothesis about those vast deposits. We used to kiss, she and I, but I think that when she came to my room I must have looked at her in the same way as that man is now looking at me from the porch — with cold preoccupied eyes. I may have been somewhat rude when I first met that small boy from the attic, but later we became friends, because in his heart I discovered a striving for great things. He carried a marshal's baton in his small hiking knapsack and had set out to go very far, and that's why I got to like him. I got a present from that pert-nosed woman, his mother — an embroidered table cloth, on which she had worked who knows how long, because it was heavily embroidered with many gaily-coloured silken threads. I forgot it somewhere, that table cloth, I don't remember exactly where, and did not particularly regret it. I wasn't sorry at all, as a matter of fact, when I realized that I had forgotten it, because at that time I couldn't be bothered with such trifles as table cloths: I had worries enough with my ore deposits, and with putting my theory into practice. But my fellow-tenant, a good-natured, kindly doctor, almost wept with sorrow. And not because of the table cloth! He must surely have raised his eyes to look into mine and my eyes must surely have stared back at him with the indifference of that man in the porch. My God, what an eye-opener! That is why he almost wept with sorrow. He had been looking at life through the rose-coloured spectacles of his own good nature and investigating the world from the low threshold of his petty, narrow interests. For such people the loss of a table cloth, received as a souvenir, is a tragedy, a melodrama, accompanied by goodness only knows how painful an experience, whereas, in such a case, that man on the porch or I would brush the occurrence away with a wave of the hand. Or we would just shrug our shoulders.

It happened in the winter of nineteen thirty-two. Daskala (the Teacher, the man in the porch in whose eyes I see my image reflected, my father) was coming back from hunting; but he was returning, as rarely happened, empty-handed. At dawn when he had left the village to go into the open country, the weather was clear and quiet and the carpeting of snow was shimmering satin-like, bluish-pink. Ideal weather for hunting! But just when he got to Old Man Mincho's Copse, that treacherous wind from the Balkan Mountains, which our people call 'Koshavata', began blowing. And then it started raging, shrieking and wailing as if it had been a funeral, driving before it great masses of ugly, sinister clouds from the Danube. The sky darkened, the snow, rosy a short while before, turned grey. The storm rose in all its fury.

The bitch roused one hare — then, a second; but it was as if a curtain of snow was falling before the sight on the muzzle of his gun and he could not see the hares. You could not have seen an ox, let alone a hare in such awful weather. The bitch yapped like mad, chasing the hare around but it could not be seen, because all the world around had turned into a boiling white mash. To shoot at random would have been stupid, because there wasn't one chance in a thousand of hitting the hare; and, after all, no one gave you the powder and shot for nothing, they cost money.

So our chasseur roamed about for an hour or two, and then decided to go back home. He wasn't in very high spirits, for no one feels very cheerful coming back without having had a single shot.

Above Old Man Mincho's Copse the road makes a steep hump. Our people call this locality The Saddle. On the right hand side, there is a dense beech forest, on the left, a deep, dank valley overgrown with hornbeam and hazelnut bushes. The slope down to the valley is as steep and naked as a wall. At this spot a few years before robbers had ambushed one of our villagers, a wealthy peasant, Lazar Pazdera, the owner of a threshing machine. They had lain in wait for him in the forest, and as he had come along the road in his cart, they stopped the horses, when he got to the place, and took his money off him and his heavy overcoat lined with wolf's skin, then they bashed in his head with a cudgel and flung him into the precipice.

For a long time after this incident no wealthy man dared cross The Saddle without company, especially on a snowy or misty day. That is why Daskala was very much surprised when suddenly through the thick curtain of snow he saw what looked like an apparition. It was the fleet-footed horse of Docho Pankov, a well-known man in those parts, an ardent member of the fascist Democratic Entente Party and one of the wealthy big shots in the village. This Docho owned more than thirty hectares of fertile land which, though it was not in one big piece but in scattered plots, constituted considerable wealth in those days. Besides this land, he kept a tavern at the lower end of the village, where the more well-to-do villagers lived. He was a bad-tempered, evil man who had been seen chasing his sons with a whip round his farmyard and pomelling his two farmhands with whatever he happened to get hold of. He worked like a madman, and in summer was never off his mare — churning up clouds of dust along the dirt roads among the fields, galloping from one place to another all the time. And just as madly as he loved his land, did he hate the communists: for hate born out of love is as poisonous as the sting of a viper. This hatred had made him join the ranks of the most rabid members of the Democratic Entente. There were other members of the Democratic Entente in the village, but it was Docho Pankov who had raised the question about my father. 'We don't want a teacher who is a communist!' he had told the country chief, pounding his fist on the table. That is the rumour that went round about what he had done. He had brought down his fist on the country chief's desk, because he was a wealthy man who kept a pub, and the representative to the National Assembly, who patronized the county chief, owed him a big sum of money. 'We won't have a communist teaching our children, and that's that!' Docho had said, and in that minute my father's fate was sealed.

Well, it was his fleet-footed mare that Daskala caught sight of through the curtain of snow, and that surprised him very much. It was the mare that stood motionless so, with its head bent down, as if listening to something, and the saddle was empty. There was no rider. A horse without a rider would have roused no suspicions if the forest around had been green and the birds had been chirping in the shade, and if from the distance, in waves, had come the long-drawn-out song of the reapers. For the rider might have left the saddle, to lie down for a while in the leafy shade of some old beech on the wayside. There would have been nothing unusual, nothing surprising in it, because the crane's bill, the wild thyme, the mosses and the carpet of last years' dead leaves would surely attract the eye of any

traveller and could hardly be resisted, even when the traveller was riding a fleet-footed horse.

Daskala recognized the horse, although its head and back were covered with snow. The empty saddle gave rise to a peculiar and sudden joy in his heart, for the heart of every living being leaps with joy at the thought that a fatal and irreparable calamity may have befallen his mortal enemy. This is one law of life, and is surely the only law to which there are no exceptions. So my father's heart leapt with joy at the sight of the empty saddle, but this short-lived joy, which lasted for but a minute or two, was the only manifestation of this natural law in my father, for, overcoming his ugly joy, he whistled to his bitch and set out searching all round and peering into the snow. And in the whirling white mash which the storm was churning up, he heard the angry yapping of the dog at a dozen paces from the standing horse.

He ran up to the spot but suddenly stopped dead, as if he had been hit in the chest: for in front of him was Docho, on his knees, and covered with snow, wailing like a dog that has been run over by a cart, trying in vain to thrust his left hand under his heavy fur-lined coat and get hold of his gun. A crust of ice had formed over the buttons and the cloth around them had become as hard as sole leather.

'You son of a bitch!' Docho hissed in a hoarse voice, 'now that you've got me in your hands, what are you waiting for, shoot!' ending his challenge with a dirty curse.

My father was not slow in cursing back — he gave curse for curse, with interest added, as he had an imagination ten times more vivid than Docho's, but he suddenly said:

'Why should I waste my powder and shot shooting at you when the precipice is only a couple of steps from here! And then, do you think me such a fool as to run right into the hands of the police!'

Realizing that he would not be able to unbutton his coat, Docho let his hand fall, held his tongue for a minute or two, and then said:

'You're a son of a bitch, and if my legs were all right and I could get up, I would fix you, though I'm only one-handed. Now that I'm crippled, I'm at your mercy, of course.'

'I'll leave your carcass to the wolves,' Daskala replied, and then asked: 'Who was it who fixed you? Tell me, so that I can go and congratulate him!'

'There is no man born who can fix me when I'm hale and hearty and my gun's in my pocket!' Docho boasted, trying to undo those buttons again. 'You ought to know, you red bastard, that at Kaimakchalan, where I was armed with only a trench shovel, I sent three niggers to kingdom come. I got the military cross for that; so how can I ever let the likes of you get the better of me?'

That was all true about the 'niggers', because Daskala himself had taken part in the battle and knew about the incident.

'It was a big battle' Daskala said, recalling that far-away day.

'The horse slipped and fell on me,' Docho said, and as he knelt, his knees suddenly collapsed under him like a bag ripped open. 'It crushed me badly,' he sobbed, propping himself with his hand in the snow.

Both men were silent. The bitch was squatting by the horse and the whirlwind was wailing along the bare hump of The Saddle, scooping up snow and piling it against every small protuberance.

'Devil take you!' Daskala sighed. 'If I'd had any luck at all, I shouldn't have dropped upon you when you're in this state, you cursed nit!'

He walked up to his former comrade-in-arms, and hit him in the face with his fist. Then he hit him again. He did not unbutton, but ripped open his victim's overcoat, pulled out the gun and took the cartridges out of the cartridge-clip and the barrel. He held the gun in his hands for a minute or so, then spat with virulence on the ground and thrust the gun back into its former place, accompanying his movements with the hottest curses.

He must have found it a tough job to get Docho back into the saddle. He fastened him with the leather strap and with whatever else he could get hold of, to prevent him from falling, and then led the horse quietly away along the snow-covered road. Docho was now sobbing with pain, now dropping asleep from cold and exhaustion — and then my father would nudge him with the butt of his gun to keep him awake. Thus they came to the crossroads where the broad, straight road to the lower end of the village began. Docho did not notice when Daskala disappeared along the winding path, leading to the upper end of the village, because it had grown dark and the snow was falling faster. But the horse knew its way and came to a halt just in front of the studded oak gate of the rich man's home.

Two years later, in the spring, Daskala was coming back from his old flour mill and, on leaving the forest to set out along the road over the hump, Petko Gatsov suddenly popped up in front of him. He was small, barefooted, ragged, with an oakum basket slung over his shoulder and a single-barrel gun in his hand, one of those old-time guns which are filled with powder and shot and are stopped with rags. Petko was one of the poorest villagers, having worked as a farmhand or as a sharecropper ever since he could remember. This gun was his most valuable piece of property, and as he had had a faultless eye ever since the days of the battles at Bitolya and Cherna, he would kill now a hare, then a partridge, so that his family (consisting of half a dozen mouths) should not altogether forget the taste of meat. He was skinny and parched, with drooping shoulders and a swarthy face, grown prematurely old with overwork in the fields and chronic hunger. But he was so open-hearted, cheerful and gay, that all the hollyhocks, calamints, nasturtiums, and peonies which the lasses grew in their gardens, seemed to be blossoming in his heart. A participant in the September 1923 Uprising, he had barely saved his skin from the clutches of the capitalist butchers, but he did not falter, and continued to work in the underground organization, helping Daskala in whatever way he could, sometimes as courier, and sometimes as a liaison officer to keep in touch with the Party organizations in the neighbouring villages.

They met thus, by chance, in the warm noontime, facing each other, looking furtively at each other from the tail of their eyes, both of them silent. It was not customary for them to be silent when they met, because they had been called up together, had crouched in the same trenches once at Cherna and had both helped to raise the 1923 Uprising. At present they were working again together in the underground movement and stood shoulder to shoulder in whatever they might have to go through: life or death, freedom or imprisonment. But now they did not talk to each other, as they did whenever they met at other times, but looked askance, as if they really did not know what to say to each other.

The air around them was full of the fragrance of blossoming elder and of sun-warmed grass. Wild bees were humming, and there was the sound of a woodpecker hammering at the trunk of a young aspen.

'Fine weather,' Petko Gatsov said finally with a sigh. He was not in the habit of sighing, and who anyway would be sighing because the cursed day happened to be warm and sunny!

'It looks as if you'd got something in your bag?' Daskala said, putting the question in a wily way. A warm note made itself felt in his voice, but it was a treacherous and inimical warmth. It was like a hand stretched out to help someone jump over a dangerous obstacle, in order to give him a sudden slap in the face afterwards. 'Is it a hare you've hit?'

Petko Gatsov had a foreboding that the hand, that friendly hand, would surely hit him, give him a slap in the face, because although it was friendly, it knew no mercy: when it was a question of wrong-doing for Daskala there was neither friend, nor foe. But Petko was used to looking danger straight into the face.

'A hare,' he laughed, the care-free smile accompanying his words ironing out half the wrinkles in his face. 'A big fat one, a regular mast-fed hog of a hare; it may have been something like a Democratic Entente mayor of the hare municipality. Do you want to see it?'

'Don't bother!' Daskala shook his head.

'Tomorrow will be a great day at home,' Petko said. 'Come and taste our stewed hare, we'll all be happy to have you among us!'

'I may drop in,' Daskala nodded. 'Thanks for the invitation!'

'We'll all be happy to see you,' Petko Gatsov said again. 'The hare is a real good one!'

'I'm sure it's a good one!' Daskala said softly.

There was a pause. A sweet, intoxicating fragrance came from the blossoming elderbushes. The wood-pecker went on pecking at the smooth trunk of the aspen.

'Well, come on now, hunter of hares, make an about-face and walk on in front of me!' Daskala ordered without raising his voice.

'What do you propose to do?' Petko Gatsov asked him coldly. They had fought shoulder to shoulder at Bitolya and at Cherna. They had sheltered from the Anglo-French landmines in the same trenches. They had unfurled the red banner of Soviet power together in their village in nineteen twenty-three and had waited together to be hanged after the failure of the uprising. Now they were working together in the same underground Party cell: Daskala was the secretary and Petko — the courier and technical executor. That is why Petko Gatsov asked his question in an ice-cold voice: because a feeling of coldness had taken hold of his heart, more terrible than the cold of all the winters through which he had lived.

'I'm going to take you to the village mayor's office, Daskala replied. And as Petko stood there, staring back at him with eyes which refused to believe his words, with eyes which, though they seemed to say they did not expect anything good of him, yet could not imagine him to be really that bad, he repeated: 'I'm going to take you to the mayor's office,' and then added, ' to let them draw up a statement of the case against you.'

They were alone at the foot of the slope, there was not another living soul anywhere around. The wood-pecker had flown away, and a heavy, over-powering fragrance came from the sun-scorched elder bush, making them drowsy. Above their heads the spring sky was blue, smiling down softly.

'They will have to draw up a statement of the case against you,' Daskala said, 'for going shooting during the close season. You've broken the law. It's true, isn't it, that you've been shooting during the close season?'

'Now, look here...' Petko started to speak, but caught his breath for a minute or two before he went on, 'since when have you begun to be so keen on obeying the orders of the government?'

He shifted the bag with the hare a little, adjusting it more comfortably to his back, but who knows why his face seemed to shrink and became smaller and suddenly grew grey: he had the air of a man whose life-blood was flowing out of a deep invisible wound. 'You're backing up the orders of those brigands!' he whispered. 'Shame on you!' And he fumbled in the pockets of his ragged jacket, obviously looking for cigarettes.

'Here you are!' Daskala said, offering him his box.

They smoked their cigarettes.

'Are you pulling my leg?' Petko asked.

'I don't feel like pulling anyone's leg. And I don't like bad jokes.'

At that moment all the hollyhocks, nasturtiums and calamints vanished out of Petko's heart. They disappeared like the couple of starlings that had flown over the aspen tree and vanished at once into the sky. His eyes grew dim.

'You were never a true pal!' he said.

'I never was, nor shall I ever be the pal of a poacher.'

'How can you call me a poacher! As if you didn't know my plight!'

'That's no excuse for poaching,' Daskala said coldly.

'Aha,' Petko paused for a while. 'So that's it. You, just you, have set yourself up to see that their orders are carried out, eh?'

'There are certain orders, Petko, which we could put our signatures to, too, without compunction and with a clear conscience.'

'You're talking like a priest!' Petko said, spitting on his cigarette and throwing it to the ground.

'No, I'm talking like a man!' Daskala replied.

'Keep your sermons to yourself and get out of my way,' Petko said bristling.

'Put that thought out of your head,' Daskala said. 'I'm taking you to the mayor's office to get you punished.'

'You'll take me?'

There was no trace left of those flowers now. Petko gripped his gun by the barrel, as if it were a cudgel.

'Come on, then,' he said, 'go ahead and try!'

'If I do try, your gun will only be good for firewood after,' Daskala laughed mordaciously. 'And then,' he went on, 'for disobeying your Party secretary and threatening him I shall have you punished in such a way that you won't be able to hold up your head again as long as you live! Think it over carefully!'

The veins on Petko's temples swelled out, like twisted cords. Cold drops of sweat appeared on his forehead. He bit his lips, his head sunk down between his shoulders, more confused and more helpless than ever, more helpless even than when he had lain beaten black and blue in the Vratsa barracks, waiting for the butchers to take him out into the yard and make him swing on the gallows.

'Pull yourself together,' Daskala told him, and his voice had become soft and friendly, 'go by yourself to the mayor, like a soldier, like a real man. It will be better for you to go of your own free will and alone, than for me to take you there!'

'And what about the fine?' Petko asked in a low voice.

'I'll pay the fine,' Daskala said resolutely. 'For you, your public confession of breaking the law will be punishment enough. To let such an offence as yours go unpunished is the same as uprooting everything that is sacred in life. Wherever there is trespassing there must be atonement and punishment,' Daskala concluded absorbed in thought.

That is how that unexpected meeting ended: Petko set out for the mayor's office with his legs almost fail-ing him, and Daskala went on his way across the meadows, that glimmered in the sun as if bedecked with gold-foil.

I think it was about Christmas time in the winter of nineteen forty-three.

We were waiting for a 'guest' to arrive from the mountains, either late in the night or in the early hours of the morning. I neither knew the man, nor was I supposed to know anything about his reasons for coming, because at that time I was living in the county town where I was carrying out some work along Workers' Youth Union lines, and had come to our village for only a few days to change my clothes and underwear and collect the precious little bag of beans to take back in my suit-case. But I guessed that the man they were awaiting must be a responsible functionary, because my father, contrary to his custom, did not hide his uneasiness and went about with a worried air, checking the secret hiding-place, a little walled-off closet in the upper floor. You entered it through a small opening high in the narrow hollow of the fireplace, and you needed a lot of experience and a faculty of nosing out things to discover it, but to my father that day everything seemed to have been made too childishly simple, without enough regard to safety, discernible to the eye of even the dullest agent of the gendarmerie.

In the evening the snow began to fall, at first it fell quietly but then a strong wind rose, thousands of stallions seemed to be galloping madly over the white hills and the quiet snowfall turned into a fierce blizzard. Such sharp changes in the weather did take place in our village, because only one ridge separated the mountain from the rolling plain.

I had just brought in an armful of wood and stacked it by the fireplace, because I intended to stoke up the fire and then take a few shovelfuls of embers to the brick oven: my mother was scraping the kneading-trough and preparing to make some bread. At that moment the door squeaked, a gust of cold air invaded the room, and the flame of the oil lamp flickered and almost

went out. Covered with snow, my father stood on the threshold.

'Bad news,' he said, stamping the snow off his boots. It was obvious that he was trying to look calm, but there was a troubled note in his voice that betrayed his anxiety. 'Bad,' he repeated, throwing his snow-covered fur-lined coat on the couch. 'A lorry full of gendarmes has just arrived. They are posting sentries along the roads.'

My mother only straightened up from her bent position over the kneading-trough and put her hands on her hips. I looked at her shadow on the wall — an immobile, rigid, frozen silhouette: a picture in charcoal on grey paper, that's what I said to myself.

My father lit a cigarette, sat down on a stool by the fireplace and was silent for a long time. Then, without taking his eyes away from the flames which were licking the smoke-blackened bottom of the kettle, he said to me in a low voice:

'Do you know the road leading to Granddad Panko's cabin?'

I smiled. Why had he to beat about the bush?

The shadow on the wall moved suddenly, came to life. I saw how my mother raised her hands from her hips starting, in an agitated way, to set the kerchief on her head to rights, although it was perfectly all right as it was.

'Get ready at once,' my father said. 'But put on my boots because you'll have to force your way through the snowdrifts. The tough going will be while you're in the gully, avoiding the road — be careful there not to drop on their sentry posts. They've surely stationed a whole chain of them, but you keep your eyes and ears open. If they begin to shoot, lie down flat and creep on your stomach.'

'Oh, I'll give them the slip and get through all right' I said.

'And tell Granddad Panko to do all he can to get word through to that man right away and warn him not to come here. If he comes, he'll surely fall into their hands; that's what you've got to tell him.'

I got up. The storm was beating against the door, the window panes were rattling in their curved frames, and the chimney was howling like a hungry wolf.

'Why don't you send Ilia, Tseko's son?' my mother said from behind the kneading-troughs. Her voice had become thin, like a thin, weak thread.

'Tseko's son?' my father turned to her.

My mother nodded. She paused for a while, licking her lips and then added:

'He has two sons besides Ilia, while ours....'

'Is the only one,' my father said, finishing her sentence for her. 'Is that all you've got to say?'

'That's all,' my mother replied. 'Let Tseko's son go.'

She dragged herself to the couch, stupefied and heavy-gaited, as if her feet did not belong to her, and dropped down onto the couch with her hands on her knees. My eyes rested on her hands and something seemed to grip me by the throat. They were holy hands, the hands of a madonna, fairer and more beautiful than those painted by Raphael. They were humble and imploring and I understood their language, and knew that they were imploring in vain.

'That's nonsense,' my father said. 'Why do you poke your nose into things which you know nothing about? Because Ilia isn't my son, you want me to let him run the risk. That's what you want me to do, isn't it? You want me to keep my own child out of danger, but you don't care what happens to another man's child — he can go under, if he belongs to another. That's a fine way of thinking! Now let me tell you something and listen so as to get me right: all those young men who serve our cause, are my sons, although my blood does not flow in their veins. But when I have to send one of them on a risky errand, I'll send my own son first of all, if I'm honest, with a man's heart in my breast, and not the heart of a woman, for it is right and proper that a man should have resort first to what is his own, to what belongs to him. And there's one more thing that you will have to undestand, so that you won't go on looking at me with the eyes of a martyr about to be cricified by cruel people. When I send Emilian out on some risky job, and not Ilia, Tseko's son, I don't do it blindly or from a sense of justice, but I have my own reasons and you must listen to them and try to understand. If, God forbid, anything should happen to Emilian, only two hearts will suffer — yours and mine. Because Emilian holds only one thread of our common cause in his hands, and if misfortune befalls him, it's only this thread that will be broken. But Ilia holds many threads — through his work he has many threads in his hands. If misfortune befalls him, a lot will be irretrievably lost. And if you want to know, not one or two, but many times more hearts would suffer if anything happened to Ilia, although that is not the most important thing. The most important thing is to act in the best interests of our cause, because what we have undertaken to do is the most sacred thing in our lives. That's why I'm sending my son, Emilian, on this risky errand, and letting Ilia, Tseko's son, stay here.' He rose from the stool, lit another cigarette, and then asked her without turning his head towards the couch: 'Did you get me?'

My mother was silent. The yellowish light of the lamp was falling on her motionless hands and they looked strange, as if they were gilded. I had seen such hands on the icons, painted in gold. Perhaps she was crying, softly and soundlessly, as she was used to do and as she had been crying all her life. But who knows why, at that moment my heart was closed fast to her grief. In it there was no room for such grief, for it was full to overflowing with reverence, admiration and a feeling of infinite wonder and boundless pride. 'There you are, see what kind of a man my father is!' I rejoiced 'A powerful man, without weaknesses and sentimental prejudices, a hero! ... Yes, the model of a real hero!'

I had many narrow escapes that snowy night. But, however formidable my mishaps were, I have a pleasant recollection of them and of the experience itself — of the shots of the gendarmes and of rolling in the snow, of the snowdrifts in which I sank up to my neck, because after all, all ended well. Granddad Panko succeeded in getting through to that man, in spite of the raging blizzard and in warning him to go back in time.

When three days later I went back to the village, the blockade had been lifted. When my mother saw me in the yard she threw herself upon me, kissing me and weeping and laughing at the same time. I found her behaviour naive, it reminded me of sentimental little books. My father, however, only patted me on the shoulder, and that was only after I had entered the room, and not very ardently at that. He asked me if my feet weren't frozen, whether I was hungry, whether I would have a drop of plum brandy to get warmed up (although I had already told him that I was not cold) and then it occurred to him to send me to the yard to chop some wood. He seemed to be put out about something. I went out into the yard and raised the axe. My hands hurt, they were cracked, and were bleeding where the flesh had turned blue around my nails. But I was thinking of my father. What a wonderful man he was! And I tried to hold the axe and swing it the way he did when he chopped wood for the big fireplace.

I remember those long-ago happenings — they are like photos, post cards, snapshots. And I have a feeling that they aren't all that remote. I even think that all the photos, post cards and snapshots which I hold in my hands, and which I am turning over and over were not taken so very long ago, but perhaps the day before yesterday or perhaps yesterday.... And maybe these things are no memories at all, but are the present, which is alive in me, in my consciousness, although I think it a world of shadows on account of our sense of time which, for clearness and for convenience, we designate with years, months and days. So and so many years pass, and we say that our experience in these years is a world of memories, a world of shadows: photos, post cards, even snapshots.

Come, now! Snapshots.... How can that figure looking at me from the porch be nothing but a snapshot? You can say what you like, but I know that this figure is alive, that it lives in my blood for good or for ill, that for me it is the present. Otherwise, how could I ever see my image so clearly reflected in his eyes?

As with time.... So with music, its the tamtams of the Tuaregs, of course. And when it comes to the essence of things, let the mathematicians take the floor. I am only a small particle of time, in which the poison of the cursed thorn is finishing off its work. A particle, which will live on as a memory in Lilian's consciousness, in Silvestra's consciousness. The near prospect of this is so poetic, that I feel like reaching out for my carbine.... But didn't I pledge myself to follow the example of Wai, the huntsman. Nunu Nhwama said that Wai was a great huntsman.

And so, under the leafy roof of the mango in Louis Philippe's garden, in Nunu Nhwama's village — at a stone's throw from the jungle and at the same distance from the prairie — I am lying with closed eyes in the hammock and have the feeling that the Great Bear is ambling on its way in the unfathomable vault of the sky above my head, that the Pleiades is like a hen watching over her chickens, that somewhere near at hand the beech forest below Todorini Koukli is softly humming its song and the Marina Bara is rippling dreamily among ferns and blackberry bushes. I see the well-known ember-like stars of my native sky, because there is no longer a mango tree above my head, nor the boundless pampas and jungle, as old as the world itself; I am smiling at the Great Bear, and at the Polar Star and at the Pleiades, listening to the song that is born among the mosses and brush through which the Marina Bara is winding its way, and the memory of that night comes to life in my mind, and I do not look back on it like a boy or fall into ecstasy as old ladies do when, on the radio, they hear some melodious waltz that was played in their youth.... Let all the good spirits that the forebears of Nunu Nhwama and Silvestra once worshipped protect me from such weakness! For when the poison of a thorn is doing its job, it is easy to fall into the position of an old lady who is listening to a melodious waltz that was played in the days of her youth.

That memory — it was awakened in my heart by the big festive fires that the Tuaregs kindled in my honour, and by their songs, dances, laughter, and the overflowing joyousness of everybody, which even the divine Niger might have been envious of. (It was not for nothing that the ibises and marabous in the nearby river valley were clamouring in a frenzy; they were envious.). And when I think now of Nunu Nhwama and Louis Philippe, of Silvestra, of my own experience, and of their overflowing laughter, I feel cold shivers creep down my back at that memory. Yet, then there were festive fires, too, songs and a great deal of laughter. Such is my lot, as my fatalistic friends, the Mauritanians say: to lie under the leafage of the tropical mango tree, recalling those fires that make my heart grow cold.

On an afternoon in June 1952 Uncle Stancho, the team leader of the first field-work team on our co-operative farm, came greatly worried to our house, dishevelled and with his moustache bristling, bare-headed and barefooted, the legs of his pants turned up to his knees. I stood at the window, behind the pots of stork's bill, right in front of him as he entered the yard, but he obviously did not see me, or, perhaps, pretended he didn't. Anyhow, he looked particularly upset, or rather amazed and frightened; in such a state you can, indeed, look at somebody without seeing him.

'Sandovitsa!' Uncle Stancho shouted, standing in the porch.

My mother had died a year before, so Aunt Sandovitsa, a widow ever since I could remember her, the youngest of my father's three sisters, was doing the housework. Her sons were independent, earning their living, but as she still felt hale and hearty, she did not care to stay in her cuckoo's nest, but went out to work, sometimes on the poultry farm and sometimes in the vegetable garden, and she used to drop in at our house in the morning to tidy it up. She was a bright, cheerful woman, who had been a beauty in her day, erect and strong and full-bosomed, and that is why Uncle Stancho even now twisted his moustache when she came up to him, swinging her body gracefully.

He did not notice me behind the pots of stork's bill and called out to her, and while waiting for her to come out, he wiped the sweat from his forehead twice with his sleeve. He had been hurrying, obviously, and the road leading to our house was steep, coming up the slope and over the hump.

'What's brought you here at such an hour?' my aunt said with surprise, on seeing him standing in the porch. And as she asked her question, in crossing the threshold of the house and going out, she raised her arms bare to the elbows to straighten the blue cotton kerchief on her head, for it had slipped a little over her forehead. It covered an unruly curl that was no longer as black as it used to be a few years before. Her kerchief was festooned along the edges with two rows of tiny little beads, red as sparks flying from a piece of burning oak, glittering in the sun, transparent, like little drops of spilled raspberry juice. But Uncle Stancho did not see the brilliance of the beads, because those raised arms, bare to the elbow, had suddenly pulled up and distended her breasts which swelled round as sunflower discs, under her thin white blouse. Uncle Stancho cheered up a little as if he had been caressed by some life-giving wind from the forest. He began to pinch his moustache into shape with two fingers, but then suddenly seemed to remember something which had slipped his memory for a while, and frowned.

'Are you looking for Ilcho?' my aunt asked. She was right in supposing that he had come to look for my father. It was perfectly natural that the field-work team leader should want to see the Party secretary. 'Ilcho is not in,' she said shaking her head. A merry, hidden, little note in her voice seemed to say: 'He's not in and how can he be in when he's a big shot, a Party secretary.'

'Ilcho went to a conference in town,' she said in explantation. 'Do you need him very badly?'

As was his habit, Uncle Stancho scratched his neck, said something in a grumbling voice and frowned — then he turned his eyes to the linden tree, the branches of which spread out over the porch. It was in blossom, its golden flowers filling the air with a sweet fragrance that dimmed your eyes. My aunt, I'm sure, was eagerly inhaling this fragrance, whereas Uncle Stancho turned his eyes to the tree so that they would not be attracted to other things; for he was afraid that that worry which had goaded him on like a wasp all the way to our house might again slip his mind.

'I haven't come for Ilcho,' he said.

'Well, for what then?' my aunt laughed.

'I've come to look for Emilian, I want to see him.'

'Ah, so,' my aunt replied, unable to make head or tails of Uncle Stancho's desire to see me.

I must admit that I, too, was somewhat surprised. It had been a refreshing sight to watch those two strong, mature people through the red flowers of the stork's bill, but now the matter suddenly assumed a serious aspect. It was the second week of my holidays, which I was spending in the village. All that time it had never occurred to Uncle Stancho to ask about me, yet now he had come running, almost like a dog with its tongue hanging out, looking for me. I wondered why it was that Uncle Stancho had suddenly felt he needed my geology?

'Here I am, Uncle Stancho,' I called out not very loudly from behind the pots of stork's bill. 'Something urgent?'

'Yes, it's urgent, of course, and not only urgent, but . . .' Uncle Stancho waved a hand, because the word which he thought most appropriate did not come to his mind. I noticed how disdainfully he examined the red flowers and laughed.

As soon as I went through to the porch, Uncle Stancho started telling me the whole story. In fact, he did not start telling it in words, but suddenly gripped me by the right hand and dragged me out into the street.

'Where are you taking the boy to?' my aunt gasped behind us.

'To the Marina Bara, or where it flowed up to now!' Uncle Stancho answered, without turning around.

When we got out on the street, he let go of my hand and took a deep breath. On that neutral territory there were no aunts, no kerchiefs, no sunflower discs to distract a man's attention and hinder a businesslike talk.

'Milcho,' he said (most of the older folks in the village called me Milcho), 'now let me take you, my dear boy, to the place where until this morning the Marina Bara flowed. For now the Marina Bara has disappeared from there.'

I bent over towards him to see whether his breath did not smell of brandy, for I remembered that since my childhood I had known that he had a weak spot for plum brandy.

'Don't think I'm crazy, it's the truth I'm telling you!' Uncle Stancho snapped. He had his own self-esteem, for he was a team-leader and did not like to be made fun of.

'How is it that it's not there?' I asked irritated. I never had a taste for silly jokes. He was two decades older than I was, but that did not give him the right to lead me about by the hand like a child and tell me all sorts of cock-and-bull stories.

'That's it! It's no longer there!' Uncle Stancho shrugged his shoulders. 'In less than an hour it dried up. I sent my people to water our fields, because it flows along the borderline between my block of fields and the block of the second field-work team. It was the turn of the second team to water their fields, but they were dawdling about, not getting on with the job, so I told my people: "Hurry up! Before those guys realize what's going on, let's unjam the rivulet and water at least a quarter of our land." That's what I told them and then sat smoking my pipe under Tsonko's elm, highly pleased with everything. For the earth never leaves a good turn unremunerated, that's what I'd heard my father say, and his father used to say it to him. I had hardly got half my pipe smoked before I saw those whom I had sent to unjam the stream running towards me, talking loudly and excitedly and waving to tell me to go to them.

It was not a wide streamlet, even a woman could jump over it if she lifted her skirt a little. Nor was it deep, I remember that the water even in the dankest, deepest places where it formed pools never reached up to my shoulders. It wasn't long either — not more than about twelve miles. Its basin was made up of a few meandering brooklets, which all went dry during the first hot days of summer. Such was the Marina Bara that flowed through our village.

But it possessed one quality which not one of the bigger, more important rivers in the neighbourhood, in the county, or even in the whole region could boast of. It possessed the most wonderful of all the wonderful qualities in the world: constancy. Yes, constancy.

For what is a river, anyway, that's a torrent in spring, wide, swollen and turbulent, but dwindles down in summer to a miserable, trickling little stream? Such a river obviously can't be of any great use.

Our narrow, rather shallow Marina Bara had nothing in common with those roaring, turbulent torrents. In the closest, hottest, driest days in August it was just as big as it was in spring or in late autumn, during the heavy rainfalls. It was a modest friend of the people and of the earth, only a rivulet but always constant, never fickle.

Once upon a time, very long ago in another epoch, alive only in people's memories, it turned the big, rough stonewheel of my father's primitive mill, which was probably built by the grandfather of my grandfather in forgotten bygone times. And, if we are to put it into modern language, that is where the rivulet's useful economic effect began and ended. On flowing down into the plain after running away from the silence and the shade of the beech forest, it used to escape from the arms of the ferns, mosses and blackberry bushes and gurgle past the spot where the age-old primitive mill used to nestle until a decade ago, but now, in complete concord with the people's new ideas and with the concept of the 'national economic plan,' it fills our village dam with its water, that is not in great quantities, but always constant, and it irrigates the part of our land that is sown down to wheat and alfalfa, and our orchards with their apples and peaches ... and our vegetable gardens ... and how many more useful things the rivulet does as a 'garnish' to its 'useful effect!' There are the fat carps, for instance, raised in

the damlake; the dwarf power station which supplies electricity for the lighting of our summer cinema and our modern house of culture. And then there are the lights around our modern stadium. And what about the public laundry, and the public baths next door, where an oil furnace heats the water and makes it so hot that my aunt comes out of it with cheeks as rosy as the apples in our orchard.

Well, this fair and benign rivulet of ours had suddenly vanished, just as things do in the stories of "A Thousand and One Nights.' Or, rather the water had disappeared, while the bed remained, damp and moist, between its low green banks. The bed was covered with stones where the rivulet had streamed down from the mountain, and coated with slime and sand in the plain. The villagers had already come out, gathering on the right and the left bank, on the upper and lower course, peering and poking about with picks and shovels — men and women in groups and in a long procession, the whole village.

'Maybe the earth has opened somewhere around the source where it rises,' Uncle Stancho sighed with outspread hands. 'I've heard of such things. A bottomless pit opens, and that's the end of it. And then the water comes out again, say fifty miles away, in another district.'

'Or in another state,' I laughed.

'Well, even if it isn't in another state but just in another village, the trouble is that it won't be here, and we'll have lost it.' He twisted his moustache and cast a glance at me from under his eyebrows. 'I've brought you here to have your say as a learned chap. It's no laughing matter for me.'

We stood under Tsonko's elm, about fifty paces from where, an hour or two before, the clear mountain water had been bubbling and splashing. A whitish mist was rising like smoke above the wheat-fields, marking the waterless bed of the river.

'It's no laughing matter,' Uncle Stancho repeated angrily, filling his clay pipe with tobacco. This broad-shouldered husky's heavy hands, as big as shovels, knotty at the joints and very self-confident, trembled as if their sinews and muscles had suddenly grown soft; the cut tobacco slipped between his fingers and fell to the ground.

'Come!' I said. I took the tobacco-pouch from his hands and filled his pipe. A sharp, tickling, nicotine smell came from the clay bowl.

'This is a heavy blow to all of us,' he sighed, slowly puffing out the pungent smoke from his mouth. 'It's one thing to be growing wheat in an irrigated field, and quite another to be scratching it out of parched soil. I had to fight for such a long time to get hold of just that piece of irrigated land for the wheat. There was such bickering about it in the council, and now, well . . .'

'Uncle Stancho,' I interrupted him, 'have you ever been in that tunnel under the rocks where the water rises?'

Uncle Stancho shook his head.

'I'll go in,' I said. 'As a boy I crept in once with the sons of Todor Pantov, the chap who used to gather herbs and who had an apiary in the Hazelnut Meadow.'

'He died a long time ago,' Uncle Stancho said.

'I sneaked in with his sons, Pantelei and Lazar, who are still mountaineers. We entered the tunnel together, but we didn't go very far along it. The day before yesterday, at the Library Club, Lazar told me that he and his brother were members of the mountain-climbing section of the county hiking society. Go to him and tell him to give you a rope — he knows what kind of a rope I'll need.'

'You don't mean to pull the Marina Bara out of the pit with a rope, do you?' Uncle Stancho laughed condescendingly.

'And then,' I went on, 'go to the quarry warehouse and get a 30-yard length of Bickford wick, a percussion cap and a detonating fuse.'

'Well, what do you propose to do?' Uncle Stancho looked at me goggle-eyed. 'Do you know . . . .' Now there were no sunflower discs around him, but that word which he thought was the aptest to express his thought had again suddenly slipped his memory. He had always

been our neighbour and was obviously worried about 'Ilcho's son,' for percussion caps and detonating fuses were dangerous things, and it wasn't everybody's business to play around with them.

'Uncle Stancho,' I said pretending to look offended, 'you hurt people when you show you have no confidence in them, when you don't believe them! Uncle Stancho,' I went on, 'hasn't it occurred to you that to sound the earth on the inside and examine it in its hollow places is also part of my profession? Come on,' I patted him on the shoulder, although it wasn't very decent of me to treat him like that, because he had five decades behind him, besides being a team-leader, 'run over to Lazar's,' I told him, 'and bring the things I've told you to get to our house, and try to do it without raising a fuss and without superfluous explanations: don't say a word about my intention to enter the tunnel, do you understand me?'

I took my flash-light and two spare batteries and at about four o'clock in the afternoon was already at the entrance to the tunnel I had no time to lose, although my eyelids smarted with sweat and the heat made bright spirals and circles in the most vivid colours of the spectrum dance before my eyes, I crouched down on the ground at once, pushed aside the clustered bushes in front of me and in less than a minute I crawled under the low vault gaping at the base of the stone wall.

It was a tough passage through this opening, difficult to make the several yards and fight the water rushing out from inside. For the vault was just high enough to allow you to hold your head above the water; it was between one and a half and two yards wide. And the stream, icy cold, painfully cold, flung you furiously out, twisting your arms about and tearing your feet off the smooth stone-covered bed. The slightest wavering in your will-power and you were thrown outside, always hitting some hard protuberance without the water making any effort, as it tossed you like a chip of wood. The Pantov brothers had been thrown out several times, as if in jest, for then, too, they were small and skinny as dried mackerels. It was then that Lazar got the scar above his left eyebrow.

I was heavier and stronger, and did not yield to the water, but always managed to overcome it. I enjoyed getting the better of it, imposing my will, and feeling how my muscles overcame its resistance, and perhaps for this and no other reason I used to dive into these rapids. Unlike the two Pantov brothers, I found nothing mysterious and sinister in the darkness of the tunnel, although its narrowness oppressed me, and the terrible swashing of the water aroused a dim anxiety in my heart, almost fear.

Well, now after I crept through the tunnel, the setting suddenly changed, so suddenly that if I had not known it formerly I should have been dumbfounded and stunned with amazement and wonder. Where the narrow tunnel ended like a gut, a square opened out, a cathedral to the imagination of those inclined to mysticims, a forum for those who love high-sounding, high-flown words. For me this meant liberation, air, space, where I could stretch my shoulders unhindered, where I could stand erect, without fearing I should hit my head against the stone vault.

Each one of us had seen this enormous square in his own way — this square in which the Marina Bara looked indeed like a poor little piece of galloon, like that galloon which Aunt Sandovitsa used to turn up the hem of her Sunday skirt with. On the smooth wall of the rock near the entrance, a heart and, under it, the name, 'Verka' could still be seen. The heart and the name underneath it were carved long ago by Lazar's hand. He and I were classmates, and Verka sat on the front bench next to the teacher's desk. We boys then were each sensible of the vastness of this square in a different way, felt it differently. Pantelei, for instance, drew a duck next to his brother's symbol of love. All this suddenly came to life again for a moment or two in the beam of my flashlight and then vanished, for it seemed to me now utterly paltry, utterly insignificant. We had not ventured then further, beyond the walls of this hall. It seemed that nobody had gone further, because from there the Marina Bara again flowed under a very low vault, and it was no longer like a poor little piece of galloon but was a roaring fury in a narrow stone funnel — who knows how long the funnel, but certainly longer and narrower than the first one.

I made sure that the spare batteries were in the pocket of my jacket, tightened the straps of the rucksack on my back, containing the rope and the Bickford wick, knelt down in the empty bed of the stream and went on ahead. The air here was icy and somehow heavier, the stony bed of the river more slippery, the darkness — denser. The cursed funnel was at some places so narrow that I could hardly find room for my elbows between the walls. Then it would suddenly become wider, and I stopped to get my breath and rest, but while resting I felt my ears thundering, as if waterfalls were roaring in them, but I tried not to think of that, neither of waterfalls nor of thunder. During such a breather, the twentieth or thirtieth, I saw Uncle Stancho's bristling moustaches in my mind's eye, and I laughed out loud. I remembered how those sunflower discs had thrown him into confusion, and laughed again. Then I realized that the cold was getting worse and that I was shivering, and I decided to shorten the time of my breathers and not to laugh while resting.

That is how I crept along this stone funnel, dragging myself along the bottom of it with the feeling that I had been dragging myself like this for hours, who knows since when, for a very long time indeed. But I was no novice in these matters and knew from my own experience that your feelings often misled you, so I decided to check up on my sense of time. 'Fifteen minutes,' I said to myself and looked at the phosphorus hands of my watch. Only eleven minutes had elapsed since the moment I had knelt down in front of the second tunnel.

At the place where I checked the time, the walls of the tunnel were so narrow and so close to each other that there was no room at all for my elbows. 'Oh, if only I were as thin as those two brothers,' I sighed, putting out my flashlight, 'I would be able to move on a little further ahead, just a little further.'

And then, perhaps owing to the darkness (darkness always sharpens your sense of hearing) or because I had put my ear to the stony floor to listen, I had the feeling that I heard water somewhere, not very far away, water flowing, gurgling and splashing.

I pressed the button of my flashlight and at once noticed a crack in the tunnel, which began from my right shoulder, went along the vault, made a few zigzags and disappeared about fifteen yards in front of me. Where the crack disappeared, the tunnel opened wide: it was the entrance to a second hall, perhaps, although considerably smaller than the first had been. The entrance was blocked by a jagged block of dark syenite, pointed at the top. It was lying firmly barring the entrance, with its broad base on the ground. It seemed to me that it was behind this block of stone that the water was gurgling and running so near at hand.

It was growing dark when I met Uncle Stancho again under Tsonko's elm. While waiting for me to start speaking, he filled his pipe, but did it mechanically, because his pipe was already full, yet he went on putting in tobacco and pressing it down with his thumb.

'There's been a little landslide,' I said. 'The vault of the gallery has cracked and a rock has been torn off. This rock has blocked the flow of the stream and has diverted the waters to one side. If we blow up that rock, the water will probably flow back into its proper channel, along its old bed. But the job will have to be done,' I added after a pause, 'by a thinner man, because the tunnel there is too narrow for such shoulders as mine.'

'Just fancy!' Uncle Stancho said, and although it had already grown dark, I saw or, perhaps, felt his face brightening up and his eyes smiling. 'So that's it, just fancy,' he said shaking his head in surprise, 'and in your opinion there is a probability .... 'Then, because he was a man in a responsible position, a team leader, he was startled by the fact that he had betrayed his emotion, and now asked me in a very businesslike tone: 'Well who do you think, or rather who is to be the thin man who is to creep up to that place to put in the explosive? Who do you think could do it?'

'One of the two Pantov brothers,' I replied.

'The job won't be without a certain amount of danger,' he remarked.

'There are certain risks,' I agreed. 'The explosion may cause another landslide, the gallery may crack in another spot, another block of rock or several others may be torn off .... The tunnel is narrow,' I explained, 'and it cannot be made stronger or propped up before the explosion.'

Uncle Stancho was silent for a little while.

'Look, you have surely been thinking of the younger Pantov, Lazar,' he said.

I turned round to avoid his eyes, and shrugged my shoulders.

'You've guessed wrong,' I answered. 'Pantelei, the elder brother will have to go.'

'Why Pantelei?' Uncle Stancho raised his voice. 'You said yourself that there was a certain risk in this job, that the gallery might cave in at some place and crush the man?'

'Well, and so what?'

'Pantelei is a married man,' Uncle Stancho said 'Don't you know?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Or do you think Lazar's not tough enough?'

'On the contrary!'

He stared into my face.

'Well, if you say "on the contrary" and he's tough enough, why have you fixed on the family man, on Pantelei?'

'I've got my reasons,' I said, yawning. I did not feel like yawning, but yawned because the conversation had begun to irritate me, and I gave him to understand that I wanted to go.

'You'll have to discuss this point with your father,' Uncle Stancho said. 'You'll have to talk it over with him in any case. He is Party secretary and you can't decide such questions without having his consent.'

'It never occurred to me to do such a thing!' I laughed. 'How could I decide such a question without him? Do you think I'd do such a thing? I'll put my proposal to him,' I concluded, 'but it's up to him to decide.'

The night was silent and starry. The sky in the west was still blue and silky and bright, as if behind its dark curtain, infinitely far away, there was an ocean of silver light. Above my head, the vault of heaven was dark and impenetrable, the stars shone more vivid and brighter, and I preferred that velvety blackness with what looked like golden swarms of bees to the blue transparent silkiness above the western horizon; I felt it closer to my heart.

Walking down the slope, I listened to the chirping of the grasshoppers, felt the warm, sweet breeze caressing my face as it blew from the wheat field and I thought about many things, but most of all about Lazar and his elder brother Pantelei. In fact, while thinking the matter over, I thought the most about myself, of what right I had to interfere in other people's lives, about those scales in my conscience on which I had to weigh up all circumstances in deciding which of the two brothers I was to put up to face death.

When I got home and told my father the whole story from beginning to end, I pretended to be uncertain about my choice and asked him:

'Which of the two shall I send?'

I just wanted to make sure for my own sake, whether I had settled this difficult problem correctly.

He cast a stern glance at me, paused, and then shrugged his shoulders.

'What a question to ask!' he said in wonder. 'As if I hadn't taught you how you've got to act in such circumstances!'

He was very tired, and was hurrying to turn in.

'You've got to send Pantelei,' he said, bending over to untie his shoe strings. 'If it's necessary that one of the two should risk his head for the common good, let Pantelei take the risk! Lazar is more useful to society and society has more need of him than of his brother

Pantelei, now hasn't it? Think about it,' he said, enumerating his reasons on the fingers of his hand. 'Lazar is president of the Library Club, secretary of the Party group there, municipal councillor, planner on the co-operative farm and is absolutely suited to all these jobs and doing his work excellently well. They have a very high opinion of him at the County Party Committee and intend making him my successor. There's even a rumour that in the coming elections they'll make him stand for parliament! It's only this passion of his for Alpinism, this mountain-climbing, that makes him seem a little odd, but what man is there without any odd traits at all in his character? And what's Pantelei? A good man, no doubt about it, industrious, and diligent, who doesn't even smoke. He pays his membership fee regularly, attends our meetings regularly, but you can't say that he is of any exceptional use to the community.... It's because he knows only three things: his work on the farm; his games of leapfrog at home with his sons (he has three fine lads); and on Sundays climbing the rocks of The Saddle. He has only one thing in common with his brother — his mania for mountain-climbing. But in climbing, too, Lazar is the better man: he is president of the mountaineering club, and was sent to Sofia as delegate to the Hiker's Congress. Pantelei is just a rank-and-file member of the Party, who does not want to take part even on its executive board, though rumour has it that he is the best in scaling mountain cliffs and there's no one around here that can compare with him as a mountaineer.'

He took off his boots, sat down on the couch and stretched out his legs. I noticed that they were swollen at the joints — of late he had had some trouble with his heart. He was often short of breath and sometimes had fits of long, dry coughing.

'Both of them are good chaps,' he said, rubbing his forehead. His voice was petering out and tiny drops of sweat appeared on his upper lip. 'They're good boys,' he repeated, 'but if one of them has to be risked, you'll risk Pantelei.' He undid the collar of his shirt, turned his head a few times to the right and then to the left, as if something was gripping him by the throat, and, as before, when he was in the prime of life, he put an end to our conversation with the familiar peremptory words: 'That's all!'

I knew him too well to have supposed or imagined for a moment that he would not think just like that, or that it would occur to him to think otherwise. But what surprised and pleased me at the same time was that his thoughts were absolutely without any of those sentimental reasons which Uncle Stancho, who was, after all, his age and his friend, had been so deeply concerned with.

I stood at the window of my room, watching the brilliant rubies in the black velvet of the sky with the eyes of a victor. I was happy, felt like singing some solemn song, some hymn, glorifying the power of man's spirit, those powerful men capable of rising above the pettiness of everyday life, to blaze a path of deeds of greatness.

I gave Pantelei a few more yards of Bickford wick, to enable him to move away to a safer distance from the explosion. I put a hammer and a wimble in his bag, a packet of plaster of Paris, and wished him good luck.

I sat at the entrance to the tunnel, and Uncle Stancho, the doctor, and the chief of the militia sat stretched out a little to one side. The doctor unfolded his newspaper, obviously deeply interested in a long editorial. The chief of the militia took out a small looking glass from the pocket of his jacket and, fixing it between a couple of sticks, began to busy himself with a pimple on his cheek. Only Uncle Stancho did nothing. As he lay flat on his back, he turned his head now and then to cast an angry glance at me, while he pulled at his moustache. He was probably searching his mind for the aptest, most virulent word to fling at me, but the word stubbornly escaped him.

The sun was scorching. The smooth surface of the rock reflected the heat, and there was a smell of elder and thyme and of wormwood in the air. I kept looking at my watch: the hand of the seconds moved seemingly fast, jumping from one small line to another, yet time seemed to be creeping slowly, dragging on reluctantly behind the hand.

At the fifteenth minute I could bear it no longer.

'Doctor,' I said, 'what's the article about?'

The doctor started, stared at the newspaper and began looking for the headline. The militia chief had quite forgotten the pimple on his cheek, but continued to look fixedly in the mirror.

'Ugh!' Uncle Stancho said, propping himself on his elbow.

A hawk circled in the sky high above our heads. A jay gave a warning shriek in the hazelnut grove.

At that moment I heard a sound from the depth of the tunnel, like the sighing of a sudden gust of wind, but very mild and soft. Then there came another sound like a dozen carriages on a soft, smooth road drawn by horses that hardly touched the ground with their hoofs.

And at last I heard the rushing, swashing sound of approaching water.

'The water!' I cried out, jumping to my feet.

'Gurgling and foamy, it poured spluttering out from under the vault like an angry apocalyptic serpent.

'Hurrah! Hurrah!' the militia chief shouted.

He tossed his looking glass into the air, and I saw how it flashed in the sunlight like a scale of mica.

The doctor crawled on his knees to the water, bent down, scooped it up with his hands and splashed it on his face.

The jay once again cried out somewhere nearer than before.

'Good! Good! That's very good!' Uncle Stancho kept repeating deeply moved, twisting his moustache. He had waded ankle-deep into the water, and as it was ice-cold, having sucked in the terrible cold of the underground kingdom, Uncle Stancho was hopping from one foot to the other, as if he had been burned by something from below, on the soles of his feet. Then all of a sudden, he stood still, staring at me: 'Well, but where's Pantelei?' he asked. 'Where can he be? Why hasn't he come out?'

He only put into words the question which I, too, was asking myself.

Things, in brief, developed as follows:

I dived under the vault as I had done before, but my muscles were now much tougher and stronger, and I managed to go against the current and get the upper hand of it at that most dangerous spot without losing too much time. When I crept into the big hall, the forum where the heart and the duck were drawn on the wall, I switched on my flashlight and ran past the water that was roaring along in its stony channel.

I found Pantelei in front of the second vault, where the hall became suddenly lower at the entrance to the tunnel through which you could barely creep. He was lying flat on his face on a thin, wet rock only a foot or so from the water. As he had been creeping back along the tunnel, the stream had overtaken him and, raging as it was because of suddenly being let loose, pounced on him and torn him off the smooth bottom of the riverbed, hurling him against the protruding right side of the vault. His arm above the elbow had been smashed to pieces with the crash. The doctor told me later that when I carried him across the hall, the arm was hanging only by the tendon.

I cannot recall even now how I got him out through the first tunnel. When I put my head out and the sun shone in my face, I must have been half-drowned.

I only remember Uncle Stancho's eyes. They were not eyes, but two flames, two swords, eager and ready to burn and transfix and destroy me.

They took Pantelei to the district hospital to amputate his arm.

In the evening the Komsomol Society organized a big evening party in the open in my honour. There were dances, including chain dances. The young people kindled big fires and two brass bands had been called in to play.

The whole village was celebrating, young and old, because the Marina Bara had gone back again into its

course. The crops would get the necessary moisture again, the fruit trees — water, the water melons and vegetables — their sweet, life-giving juice. It was wonderful, indeed, and the people were joyful and gay and in no hurry to go to bed that night.

I danced the ordinary dances with the girls and the chain dances with the young newly married women, raised toasts, and drank a lot of wine. And it was only once or twice that I remembered those eyes. I don't know in what connection. After all, I said to myself, the big things are what count, the big victories. If you start digging into petty things and tripping up against them you get nowhere.

That is what I said to myself when once or twice I remembered those eyes, I don't know for what reason. Most of the time, almost the whole night, I spent in laughter and playing games.

June 3, a little before dawn

The wisest, most beautiful of all goddesses has stretched out her all-comforting, protective hand over the world. She awakens after midnight when the celestial Scorpion has already descended beyond the silent wall of the jungle, and when the fiery eyes of the maned king of beasts are mirrored in the smooth, dark surface of the divine Niger. Full and oversatiated, the maned king's lips and jaws are smeared with blood. He is fuming with the live flesh he has swallowed and he is noisily quenching his thirst, gulping down as much water at one gulp as would fill a dozen of Sana's biggest gourds. And then, highly pleased with himself and with life in general, he sets out for his lair amid the tough brush-wood and scrub, heavy and dignified, as befits a satiated king. It is then that Silence appears, the wisest and most beautiful of all goddesses. No one can tell exactly from where she appears — whether she comes up from the caverns in the banks below the surface of the Niger or out of the depths of the jungle, or descends from the heights of the Milky Way; but what difference does it make after all!

I am not only aware of, but actually feel her hand on my forehead and close my eyes.

Everything is silent, everything is asleep: ibises and marabous, monkeys and panthers, hyenas and steppe jackals, the roof of leaves above my head, the cacti and palms — the whole world. There are no fires, no dances, no tamtams, no ostrich feathers. There is only silence, the bottom of the divine Niger, the caverns in its banks below the water, full of the entangled roots of gigantic macarango trees. The branches of these trees touch the sky, the Milky Way, because they are the branches of the giant macarango trees, and starry flocks are the flowers, the orchids and bromeliads, the buds of the lianas and shrubs that at any moment will swell and burst into blossom.

Silence — the wisest and most beautiful of all goddesses: even her all-comforting hand, which has already lured sleep to my eyes — the macarangos that touch the sky with their branches, starry shrubs and scrub — even her hand cannot drive those two flames out of my mind, those two swords that want to burn me, transfix me, destroy me.

And I want to tell that lady with the umbrella on my thermometer and Monsieur Charles Denois, and Lilian in her tip-truck at the Nakri-Sosset Canal, and Silvestra, and, most of all and above all, great hunters like Wai: joys are worth nothing, no matter how great, if the last conscious moments of life are bitter. Because we look back on the whole of our lives in these last moments that we carry away with us into eternity.

ROYAL THIEF

June 4, in the morning

I wake up in good cheer, my heart brimming with happines. This is how I used to wake up once, long ago, I don't remember and do not wish to remember when; but I know that there was such a time in my life. I used to fall asleep with a joyful song in my heart and had the feeling that the strong wings of birds or a flock of mighty birds were carrying me over a sunny hill, over meadows red with blossoming poppies, over smiling fields studded with gay sunflowers. I would wake up, and that song would still be going on, as if it had never been interrupted — a gramophone record which had been automatically turning all the night near to my pillow. That flock of birds were still carrying me on their wings and under me shone the hilly hump that separates our village from the mountains, and the sunflowers were smiling like early-rising, newly married women.

'Good luck to you!'

'Thank you!' I waved my hand.

And I felt happy and well.

I wake up now in the same fine mood. Somebody has already lifted the telephone receiver and a very pleasant voice is telling me that the poison of that thorn may not finish off its job, that, as a matter of fact, such a thing has happened and may happen again, that you can never tell. The voice is warm and soft, like a woman's bosom, like Silvestra's velvety breasts. Was she not with me the other night after the Dance of the Millet with the Winds, although now I say to myself that this may have been only a dream. But she was with me, she surely must have been, for otherwise how should I have come to compare that soft voice with her velvety bosom?

Be that as it may. I feel haddy, because the poison of that thorn may, after all, fail to finish off its work, and that is why I am smiling hopefully at the blue mosaic of the sky and its thousands of small faience tiles which I see throught the dense leafage of the mango. They are like so many thousand smiles, repeating: 'Maybe, maybe nothing has been lost,' prompting me to jump out of my hammock, to seize my gun and take to the jungle, or to that no man's land between the jungle and the silver pampas. That's what they prompt me to do, but I'm in no hurry to jump out of my hammock, for I'm afraid that the song with which I awoke might fade away, that the gramophone record maght suddenly stop, that those powerful wings which are carrying me over the sunny hill might droop. And why should I hurry, after all, when Silvestra is somewhere near at hand, somewhere in the yard near the cabin with that long pestle for husking rice in her hands or with the big knife, that ridiculously big knife of her father's, with which she cuts the vegetables? Armed with such knives the strong hunters go out and confort the spotted leopards in life-and-death struggles, whereas she just cust cucumbers and chops up peppers with it.

I feel happy and I laugh in a loud voice.

'Silvestra,' I ask, 'why are you here, why aren't you with your father and your mother out in the fields?'

I listen as I lie in the hammock and from the neighbouring yards a terrible noise reaches my ears — a flock of gay-coloured parrots have alighted there, a thousand first-form pupils spelling out senselles words at the top of their voices — words consisting of only open vowel sounds. But I listen, because I am sure that Silvestra is about somewhere. I feel well, I slept well in the night and that is why I wish her to be semewhere about. I wish everything to be beautiful this

morning, smiling and fresh, like the smiles above my head, like the shining pieces of brilliant glass peeping through the leafy roof of the mango.

I am not mistaken, because my ears are accustomed to catching even the most insignificant muffled whisper of the earth. Let the thousands of gay-coloured, first-form pupils shriek to their heart's content, the earth tells me that Silvestra's legs are making their way to me, with rings of beads above the ankles, strong, swarthy legs, accustomed to all kinds of ways.

'Good morning!' Silvestra laughs. Her teeth shine like a pearl necklace, she bends to slip under the branches of the mango.

Her voice is really like velvet, as are her breasts, and I ask myself whether, indeed, she had been with me the other night or had it been just a dream.

'Good morning!' I answer, and I feel as if all the little smiles have gathered into one single big smile, and that the whole world has dissolved in this big smile. 'Why aren't you in the fields?' I ask, picking an emerald mango leaf.

'I'm not in the fields,' Silvestra answers. She is only a pace or two away from me. Her gaily coloured skirt is a small piece of that sunny hill over which I was flying a few minutes ago. 'They told me to stay at home,' she explains.

'Ahem!' I prop myself on my elbow and that piece of hill shines still more brightly before my eyes.

'I'll bring you your breakfast in a minute,' Silvestra said.

'Why will you bring it?' I laugh. 'Do you think that I shan't be able to get up?'

'No,' answers Silvestra, 'I don't think so.'

'Of course,' I say. 'I even intend to go out hunting for a while today. My hands are itching to go.'

'You are a great hunstman,' Silvestra laughs. She has said this to me many times, always laughing, but this time her laughter seems to me not quite so cheerful. Or maybe I am wrong. 'You are a great huntsman,' she repeats, 'a very great one! You killed the lion and put our hunters to shame. The lion robbed us of our oxen. He ate up our fattest ram, Babo.' And who knows why, on mentioning Babo, she bursts out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, so impetuous that even her gay-coloured skirt begins to jump about on her thighs.

'So they left you to stay with me,' I say.

She turns on her heels, bending down to set right the ring of beads above her left ankle, which is perfectly all right as it is. Then she straightens up and says in an authoritative tone like that of Sana, her mother:

'The milk has boiled and your bowl is full. Nunu Nhwama has sent you a chicken. We have chickens, too, but he told me to boil his for you. He sent another thing for you, too, but I'll let you see it when you come to drink your milk.'

She is speaking like the lady of the house, like a grown-up woman, very seriously.

'How alike they all are,' I say to myself, looking after her, 'in spite of the differences in latitude and longitude.'

It is no discovery, of course, that all women are alike, but I feel well, for I do not want to be a stranger in the family of Sana and Louis Philippe.

'I'm coming,' I nod to Silvestra, stretching one foot down out of the hammock.

As soon as I sit down in front of the big gourd filled with milk, Silvestra comes up to me with a lion's skin, well dried and preserved, flung over her broad shoulders. The terrible head of the beast covers her left breast, the king's golden-blue and violety-yellow mane envelops her neck, its curved claws shining with fierce brilliance at the edge of the huge paws.

Silvestra stands before me for a while, to let me feast my eyes on her, of course, because she, too, likes to be admired as do all her sisters throughout the world. But she likes to be admired when she has dressed up in something, and what more regal attire could you have than a lion's skin?

Now, satisfied with my admiration, or satisfied to a certain extent, she takes off the lion's skin, ceremoniously spreading it on the floor next to me, and carefully straightening out the folds.

'It is yours,' Silvestra says. 'This is the skin of the lion you killed, and you are entitled to it. Nunu Nhwama has cleaned and dried it himself, because he learned from his father how to do it. None of our huntsmen ever cleaned and dried a lion's skin.'

I put my hand on the king's head, which is eyeless, because Nunu Nhwama has no artificial eyes at his disposal. Then I stroke the royal mane softly and smile. Who knows what I'm thinking of at this moment, but my smile is not very cheerful, for I fear that that hill with the blossoming poppies may slip away from under my feet. Then I do something quite unexpected, both for me and for Silvestra.

I stand up (not quite so quickly and easily as a matter of fact), get hold of the skin and fling it over my shoulder. Silvestra looks at me (or rather at the skin), with admiration in her eyes.

'Come,' I tell her, gripping her a little roughly by the hand, 'take me to your cabin, open the door and let me in first.'

She just looks at me for a while, as if not understanding my words and their meaning, but then smiles a broad smile, the pearl necklace shining between her full lips.

She takes me to her cabin without pulling her hand out of mine, opens the heavy door, woven out of woody liana stalks, and lets me in first. Her cabin is not as spacious as that of Louis Philippe and Sana, but it is lighter and, in a way, more attractive, because it is almost empty. The bed is covered with mats embroidered along the edges with coloured bast and with strange ornaments made of different gay-coloured feathers, big and small, fastened to the bast at the corners.

An unpretentious and simple furnishing; primitively naive and therefore wonderful, like everything that is closest to nature and its laws.

I feel that Silvestra is standing behind me. She is breathing quickly and is surely all worked up. I feel somehow awkward, because it seems to me that she is being theatrical.

I take the lion's skin off my shoulder and fling it negligently on the bed.

'Take it as a keepsake from me,' I say to Silvestra. I turn to her, the velvet of her bosom caresses my eyes. She is a woman already and understands, for she has learned to understand, the speech of men's eyes. 'I wish you to bring forth and raise a great huntsman on this skin after you get married,' I say to her, wiping my forehead, on which drops of sweat have come out.

'I'll surely bring up a great hunter,' she nods, and as before, when she mentioned the ram Babo, she again bursts out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. Everything in and on her jumps about when she laughs like this: her shoulders and breasts and her gaily coloured skirt.

I go out, while she stands on the threshold, and asks:

'What am I to tell Nunu Nhwama?'

'Well, you'll tell him that I gave it to you as a present. He won't have anything against it.'

'Why should he?' Silvestra shrugs her shoulders. 'The skin is yours. You killed the lion.'

'That's right,' I agree, 'I killed it. Well,' I say to myself, I wonder how I did it!'

I am lying in the shade on the riverside. The quiet waters of the Niger are licking the strip of sand at my feet, splashing and sprinkling me from time to time with drops of cold water. It is quiet and hot, infernally hot, and even the robust marabous have retired to the cool, shady places among the huge riverside boulders.

Silvestra is kneeling at some ten paces from me, doing her laundry. When she is fed up with washing, she jumps into the water and bathes. She frolics in the water to her heart's content, and then comes out on the bank, casts her father's line and waits for some lazy carp to swallow the hook. As soon as that lazybones swallows the bait, she pulls it dexterously out, throwing it instantly into her refrigerator-pool, dug out on the bank and shaded from the sun with ferns and palm leaves. When she has had enough of carp-catching, she goes back to her washing. And all the time she is singing songs that are playful and quick, but broken up by pauses, so it seems to me, in their most dynamic and thrilling parts. In these pauses, when she is erect, she makes different kinds of movements, expressive of love, of a certain call to love, but reserved and measured, and not at all vulgar.

But I lie on the sand, listening to the quiet murmuring of the water and the splashing of the soft waves at my feet, and I think about the royal thief, the lion.

This is how it all happened:

A little before the last heavy rainfalls, on my way to town, I happened to stop once over at Nunu Nhwama's village. I dropped in to see my friend Louis Philippe, as I always used to do, to have a chat with him, to pay homage to Sana's hospitality by drinking a gourd of cold milk, and to have a little laugh with Silvestra, asking her whether she had been to the regional settlement again to confess her sins to the priest. But I found Louis Philippe and his men downhearted, unusually thoughtful and in a despondent mood. His neighbours were in much the same mood, and the whole village looked to me puzzlingly hushed and quiet. The women were husking the rice in silence — a sign of how downcast the villagers were, and that is why I asked Louis Philippe what the misfortune was that had befallen them, whether, perhaps, Nunu Nhwama had not been gathered to his fathers where the ancestors of his ancestors lived in eternal bliss.

'Nunu Nhwama, thank God, is in perfect health,' Louis Philippe replied, deep in thought. 'He will surely live longer than his father, and his father, they say, saw four score times how the Niger flooded its banks. Nunu Nhwama is a great man, blessed with long life. He says that he will not join his forebears before he has seen one of our young men — and you know that all our children are also his children — riding that horse, that iron horse, which your brethren till the soil with, directing and ordering it about like your brethren do. That's what Nunu Nhwama says about himself. But what has cast down our hearts and banished laughter from our yards is that, in three nights, we have lost three oxen, the best and the strongest, as well as our best ram, the sturdiest one, Babo. Now the oxen are gone, and the ram, and we are not sure that tonight or tomorrow night some other ox or cow or ram will not disappear. You know that we rely very much on our cattle, and if our oxen and rams go on disappearing like this, one after the other, a lot of our land is bound to remain unploughed and our gourds without milk. And there will surely be less meat on our festive boards....

Louis Philippe asked for a cigarette. Coughing and choking with the smoke, for he was unaccustomed to smoking, he went on telling his story. And his story was a dismal one, although at times it made me laugh inside. But I refrained from laughing to avoid hurting his feelings. Well, the long and short of it was, that a fortnight before, a lion from the jungle had made his appearance in the western outskirts of the village. Yes, a lion. They had heard him roar and startle the night with his thunderous voice, and parents explained to their little children that just the most terrible of all the terrible inhabitants of the bush was now raging in the neighbourhood. The little children had not seen a lion. The one that was now roving at large in the western outskirts had come who knows from where, most probably from a distant, very distant place. Panthers and leopards and lynxes were encountered very frequently, but in the last few years no one had ever mentioned a lion in these parts.

Then the roaring of the king of beasts had suddenly ceased, and the people, reassured gradually, took heart again, and as they weren't in the habit of thinking in bed, they were soon overcome with sleep.

At dawn of day, when those who were in charge of the cattle entered the yard to take out the oxen, cows and sheep to pasture, their hearts shrank with terror and their knees shook with fright. The fence and many places in the yard were bespattered with blood; the guard — a man advanced in years — lay on the grass with his skull smashed in, the grass around red with his blood and pinkish white with his bashed out brain. A little further on they saw a sheep with its belly ripped open, and another sheep, whole, but with its backbone broken. Both sheep, of course, were dead. The cattle were still trembling with fear, thronged together in the farthest corner of the yard. Then they saw that Anai, a two-year-old ox, was missing — a strong ox with horns like bent cudgels. From the traces of blood it was quite plain how and in what direction it had been dragged away by the terrible beast. It was the shortests and most direct way to the jungle, to the bush, in fact to the place where the Great Jungle began and which was several miles wide (several gunshots across, according to Louis Philippe).

That night Nunu Nhwama ordered three guards to stay out and sleep with the cattle. They were armed with hunting guns (surely very much like Louis Philippe's gun), with long, curved knives of the Mauritanian type, and with long, thick cudgels of a brownish wood, as hard as iron. (You could cut that wood only after having kept it steeped in water for a week). Armed in this manner, in Nunu Nhwama's opinion, the guards would be able to protect the cattle not only from one, but from two, or even three, lions. The guards that night were all strong young men. And because all knew that Nunu Nhwama, from his own personal experience, was well-acquainted with the lion's strength, they believed him and felt quite sure that on the following night they would, without fail, be dancing and rejoicing around the beast's dead body.

But the lion did not show up, nor did they hear him roar. None of the guards caught sight of his fiery eyes in the darkness, although all of them stared so hard that their eyelids swelled up and grew red, as if they had got drunk on fermenting mango juice.

The next night the lion suddenly roared out close to the fence with such force that the fence shook, as if it had been suddenly struck by a terrible storm. The lion had not shown his eyes to the guards, who did not suspect his presence and were therefore amazed and confounded by his unexpected appearance. The matter would not have ended so tragically (for they were well armed) if it had not occurred to the lion to roar a second time. His second roar ripped the air like a whirlwind, or like the Niger in the hour of the great flood; it swept the three guards off their feet, whirled them about and threw them out somewhere, far beyond the eastern end of the village, near the river bed, near the sleeping marabous.

It was thus that the king of beasts succeeded in taking away the second ox.

'Nunu Nhwama seems to have forgotten the strength of the lion.' the three guards said. trying to justify their conduct. 'He seems to have forgotten that the lion's roar is as mighty as the wildest storm. For if it hadn't been so, how could it have carried us as far as the marabous?'

'It's you who have forgotten the strength and the courage of your fathers and ancestors,' Nunu Nhwama scolded them fiercely in the Council of Elders. He ordered their weapons to be confiscated on the spot, and issued an order banning them from the square and from the festive fires for two years.

The punishment was severe, but the effect it had could not save the third ox from its doom, from the terrible fangs of the lion, nor the curly-fleeced, mettlesome ram Bado either. The third shift of guards displayed greater courage: they shot with their guns at the lion, but he paid no heed to their shots. And to have come out against him with their knives would have been inadvisable, because of the darkness — he was invisible, only his eyes flashed in the night, but was it easy to stand up against such eyes?

Nunu Nhwama had ordered them to make fires on that side of the yard which looked towards the jungle — fires as big as those they kindled on the eve of the greatest holidays. This move proved successful: the west side of the yard was protected; the lion didn't venture even to show his nose there. But it was just then that Babo disappeared: the beast jumped over the east fence, seized the ram and made off, safe and sound, in a dash for home.

The war between Nunu Nhwama's men and the lion was ruinous for the village, The old people recalled many a calamity of old with heart-rending sighs. Rumours circulated that the beast wasn't a lion, but an evil spirit embodied in a lion's skin. Some came forward with proposals to seek aid from the neighbouring villages or, if the worst came to the worst, to call in troops. Now the army was not a foreign one, but was an army made up of their own people and the troops were ready to help them with all their hearts. But it would take a long time for troops to arrive, others said, objecting to the prospal, because the soldiers were heavily armed and you could not travel fast with a heavy load on your back. While the troops who were to declare war on the lion were getting there, at least half their oxen would be devoured by the terrible fangs of the beast.

'And now,' Louis Philippe ended his gloomy story, 'the Council of Elders has been called. I heard somebody say,' he added, pausing for a while to collect his thoughts, 'and I think it was Sana who said it, that Nunu Nhwama intended to put forward the following proposal: to have fires kindled around the whole yard, and keep them burning until midnight.'

Sana who sat among us and was listening to her husband's words in silence, nodded her head.

'That's right,' she said, 'that's what I've heard. I heard it with my own ears from the lips of Nunu Nhwama's eldest daughter-in-law.'

'But do you know,' Louis Philippe said, turning to her, 'do you know what it means to have big fires kindled on all sides of the yard and keep them burning till midnight? You can hardly imagine it. It means, Sana, that half of our men and women will have to be dragging wood from the forest, and building bonfires all day long. And who is going to go to the rice fields, who'll be earthing up the millet, who'll be weeding the vegetables? You may have heard that from Nunu Nhwama's eldest daugther-in-law, but I tell you she's only made it up herself. Nunu Nhwama is wise, and he would never take away half the hands from the millet and the rice.'

'All right,' Sana turned an inquiring glance at him. 'But what about the lion?'

'I don't know. However you look at the matter, I really can't see a way out.'

He heaved a sigh, and fell into silence.

'Louis Philippe,' I said, 'let's go out, my friend, and kill the lion, shall we?'

Both of them looked at me stupefied. As if I had proposed to them that we should cut down the whole jungle from end to end, with its gigantic macarangos, cactuses and monkey-bread trees, to make a festive fire in the square.

'Kill the lion!' Louis Philippe whispered. 'Go and kill the lion? We?

Sana stroked her gay-coloured apron with her hand.

She always wore an apron reaching down to her knees.

'You are a great hunter,' I said. 'You've killed a spotted leopard and a black panther. And the lion cannot be much stronger, say, than a leopard and panther taken together.

'I have killed a leopard and a panther,' Louis Philippe said.

'We sleep on a leopard's skin,' Sana said with an almost imperceptible smile. She cast a glance at her husband and smiled again.

'There are some hunters who have killed not one and not two, but many lions,' I said. 'And those hunters aren't braver than you, Louis Philippe.'

'Have you seen such hunters with your own eyes?' Louis Philippe asked.

'Why, of course!' I lied.

They exchanged glances.

'We'll take a few more with us,' I said. 'You know the braver ones, and you'll ask a few of them to come to the jungle and accompany us. One good shot will be quite enough to put the lion to sleep.'

'Yes,' said Louis Philippe, 'a sleeping lion doesn't eat oxen.'

'And also not Babo,' Sana laughed.

They looked at each other again, delighted by the idea of the sleeping lion, and they suddenly laughed out merrily, the gay coloured apron jumping joyfully about on Sana's thighs.

They laughed for a long time and with all their hearts.

Then Louis Philippe said:

'Since one good shot will be quite enough for the lion, I'm sure I'll kill him. And then Sana will be sleeping on a lion's skin.

Sana cast an admiring and loving glance at him.

'No,' she shook her head, heaving a small sigh. 'We shall give the skin to Silvestra. Silvestra will soon take a husband to her cabin. We'll give it to her.'

'All right,' Louis Philippe agreed. He squared up his shoulders and said: 'But we shall have to send word to Nunu Nhwama. Nunu Nhwama will have to say "yes". And then we'll set out. My gun is ready. I have plenty of shot for the biggest kind of game.'

So we set out, early the following morning. Nunu Nhwama saw us off to the far end of the village, to the remotest cabin. This cabin was Louis Philippe's and that is why Sana and Silvestra were present at our parting with Nunu Nhwama, but they stood a little aside.

'The lion cannot be very far away from here,' Nunu Nhwama said, pulling softly at his long white beard with his fingers. 'He must be somewhere near so you'd better keep your eyes open. He must be very wicked for he's a lone lion and all lone beasts are wicked. But there are six of you, and you'll get the better of him. And take care of our white friend!' he said, turning to Louis Philippe and nodding towards me with his head. 'And you, too, all of you, do you hear?'

The Tuaregs laughed.

We bowed to the old man and set out on our journey.

Measured with the eye the distance from Louis Philippe's yard to the place where the jungle began did not seem very far: it was, in no case, more than two stone throws. But the place was overgrown with a thick growth of tough, creeping shrubs and roots winding all over along the ground, so we had to put in more than half an hour before we could get out of this dry morass.

The sun had risen two feet above the horizon and was scorching when at last we got out onto 'terra firma'. It was level ground, grass-covered and barren of trees. Here and there the dark crowns of huge maçarango trees rose, like gigantic umbrellas opened full out. And further away, in the distance, rose the wall, the dark bank of what was really the Great Jungle.

There were six of us: Louis Philippe, four young Tuaregs, and myself.

I walked first, at the head of the column, and may be that is why my eyes were the first to fall on him. Even now I can't tell how it happened that my eyes fell on him at once, because I was looking straight ahead at the dark bank of the jungle, and he was standing on my left hand side, about fifty paces away, up to his chest, half covered, in the rank, prickly, yellowish-green grass. But maybe we all saw him at the same time, and I only thought I had been the first to see him. And the moment I saw him, the minute I caught sight of him, for one moment, one second, I had the feeling of being alone, single-handed, that neither Louis Philippe nor the Tuaregs, nor anyone else was with me.

This must have been a delusion, of course, because both Louis Philippe and the Tuaregs had stopped dead, as if petrified at only a few paces from me and were all, like me, staring at him.

And he stood still, motionless, and you would have thought that it wasn't a lion, but an image, an apparition or a stone statue of a lion.

How long did the mutual inspection last? Only a few seconds, surely, or at most half a minute. At any rate, I don't remember any longer seconds in all my life, such an eternity of seconds: In fact at this, the first meeting with him, time ceased to exist — there were no seconds, no time at all.

And then he switched his tail, once, twice, shook his head. And then, without hurrying, seemingly having had enough of looking at us, or perhaps, being tired of it, he turned slowly away, crouched and, slipping into the grass, set out for somewhere, most probably for the jungle.

He did not take up the challenge — refused to fight.

He wasn't in a belligerent mood: we had seen each other, measured each other, and that was all. He proposed that we should part in peace.

But we shook ourselves out our stupefied amazement and went on after him. The trace which he left was in the thick grass, which swelled and opened before him and, althougt it fell back into place again, was marked by a meandering track for us to follow.

At a higher place, a sort of little mound, near a baobab ramified like a small forest, the grass ceased to more and swell — he had come to a halt. Then he took a few more steps and came out on the mound, under the blanches of the baobab, in the dark shade of its forest of branches. And at that spot he stood still again, like a statue, immobile, as if hewn out of stone or cast in rusty-red bronze.

What a sight, oh gods of the Mauritanians and Tuaregs and Bambaras from the beds and the valleys of the divine Niger! Beauty and strength combined in one body, one spirit, one life. I looked at him, and exulted, and — may Providence forgive me — at that moment I felt no anger towards him, could feel no anger, even had he stolen and devoured another hundred oxen with horns like pointed cudgels and another hundred vigorous Babos with their curly fleeces. My heart was overflowing with gratitude, overflowing with exultation, and I looked now on this jungle god as I had once, very long ago, looked at Michel Angelo's David.

'Let's move up a few steps and shoot!' I felt Louis Philippe's warm breath on my face as he whispered these words.

And we went forward a few steps and raised our guns.

Then he bent up his tail, struck his thighs with it, stretched his mane-covered neck forward and roared. The air, the silence, the vast expanse of land shining in the sun — all seemed to crumble to pieces, to tiny little pieces. He went on snarling, raging, roaring — he was taking up the challenge which we had thrown in his face because of those oxen and Babo.

I saw him crouch, taut like the strings of a drawn bow. Then I heard shots. He leapt only twice as the shots rang out. At his second leap he came down right amid the four Tuaregs, who God knows why had crowded together. One of them flew off, rolling into the grass about ten paces away, another fell to the ground, withing in pain and curling up. I heard shouts, cries, dark shadows crept about, then ran for their lives, looking for something.

Louis Philippe was standing by my side. He had pressed the trigger of his percussion gun when the lion was drawing his backbone taut like a bow string, his tail a parabola, sticking out above the grass. I heard the click of the hammer, dull, impotent. But no shot followed.

Something huge, terrible sprang into the air, cast a shadow over Louis Philippe's head, hid the sun, and then I, in my turn, somewhat reluctantly, pressed the trigger of my gun. A shot rang out. Then the world was quiet once more. When I saw the sun again, the lion's carcass lay rigid on the grass — it did not look terrible now, nor particularly beautiful, nor impressive.

In my heart I felt a terrible coldness and emptiness.

We had two casualities, two killed, in this battle, but Louis Philippe did not look particularly worried. He even said that we should envy those who had fallen in the battle, because the bards would not be singing songs about us, whereas they would be singing about them, telling their listeners, on festive nights around the fires, what great hunters they had been; and they would be remembered for a long time, longer than was a man's life. Moreover, they were both unmarried, which meant that no cabins would be bereaved, there would be no women without husbands, nor would there be any fatherless children whimpering around. It was a real misfortune when a cabin was bereaved of the husband and there was no one to light a fire in the yard. Such a cabin soon became the haunt of evil spirits. Louis Philippe was a Roman Catholic, the Catholic faith knew absolutely nothing to lay evil spirits and ghosts. Yes, it was a great misfortune, indeed, when a woman's husband died. His widow, if she was young, slept restlessly on her mat, and other men became restless, too, and then the wives of these men, and that wasn't good. It wasn't good for Nunu Nhwama either, who had to take care of the children, and provide a share for the orphans from the common granary, so that they should be well fed and grow up.

That was why Nunu Nhwama had told Louis Philippe: 'Take along good hunters, but see that they are unmarried, and if one of them happens to be married, let him be one who has only one wife and whose children are already older. His girls should have got accustomed to husking the rice and the boys, to taking the sheep out to pasture and guarding them against the steppe wolf.'

That is how Nunu Nhwama had instructed Louis Philippe, but even without these instruction, Louis Philippe knew what he was expected to do, and he had had in mind only young hunters, anyway.

'My friend,' I said, didn't Nunu Nhwama raise any objections to your joining in the hunt? You've got a cabin, and a wife, and a daughter, haven't you?'

Louis Philippe laughed. Not only had he not tried to stop him, but he had told him: 'If you come back without him you'll be a foreigner amid your own people, an unworthy man among worthy men. You will be a living corpse for your people. Your cabin will have a lord, but it will be the cabin of a man fallen into disgrace. For a Tuareg,' Nunu Nhwama had said, 'duty and loyalty to a friend are worth much more than all the cabins between the great Niger and the jungle taken together, with the women and all the children in them.'

Those were beautiful words, manly words, and they appealed to me. That is the way strong men and hunters, who owned spotted leopard skin or the skins of black panthers used to talk. They were good words and much to my liking, but who knows why, I felt a still greater coldness and emptiness in my heart; a painful cold and a terrible emptiness. I had never seen the sky above my head so grey, so utterly devoid of a little, of a very little bit of fresh, lively blueness.

They cut down a tall tree and lopped off its branches and leaves with their knives. Then they bound the lion's paws fast together in two pairs, slipped the pole under the knotted rope and shouldered the load. There were three of them carrying it, but the carcass was heavy and the going slow.

I walked behind them, somewhat to the side. If I had walked in their wake, I should probably not have tripped and that cursed thorn would not have scratched my thigh. Later I learned that the hunters used to smear the points of their arrows with the poison of that thorn — in the past, when Nunu Nhwama was still a child. In those far-away days. And if I had only walked in their wake, it would not have scratched me; it would surely not have happened, because they know the thorn and go very far round it, even from a distance.

So was the story of that hunt.

Now I'm lying on the sand listening to the sleepy splashing of the waves of the Niger at my feet. Silvestra's merry song escapes me, fleeing away somewhere to the clamorous ibises and the marabous standing so long, stock-still. And I don't worry and wonder any more for I think that all is as it should be, although Silvestra stands at only a few paces from me, hopping about and wringing the water from the gay-coloured cloth which she wears around her thighs. I feel like telling her: 'Stand still for a moment and you'll be like a flamingo — of bronze, of course, or of copper, as in the garden of the Hôtel de Palme.' But I don't tell her anything, because my idea is foolish, because many foolish thoughts revolve in my mind, because the Niger seems to be flowing above my head, and the vault of the sky seems to be flying ever higher, vanishing from my sight and dwindling away, and turning into a gay-coloured cloth, like the one Silvestra ties about her thighs. This is all due to my weakness, to the insufficiency of blood in my brain. And this has come after awakening in such a good mood and after seeing that smiling hill covered with red poppies! But I must not spoil Silvestra's song, I know that, and know it very well.

She comes up to me, kneels down and spreads a white table-cloth. It's the chicken sent to me by Nunu Nhwama. Silvestra is carving up the chicken, prattling,

laughing. She is like a rivulet jumping from stone to stone, making little pools two spans deep and very small, and then flowing on again, headlong, afraid that it may be late for somewhere.

'Eat, Silvestra, come on, eat!' I insist, endeavouring to feast my eyes again on the soft, chocolate-coloured velvet of her breasts.

She casts a smiling glance at me, offering me a piece of meat.

'How do you like the lion's skin?' I ask her, putting the piece of meat down on the table-cloth. I have made a mistake in putting it untouched on the table-cloth, for she starts, stares at me, stares at me for a long time, and seems reluctant, or unable, to swallow the morsel that is in her mouth. 'Eat, Silvestra,' I want to tell her. Little circles turn and twist in front of my eyes, violet and orange, intertwining and then untwining again into little violet lines, spirals and ellipses: a gay geometry of lights. And among these lights I see her eyes which are anxious and sad.

I realize that there must be something in my face that is worrying her. I take out my pocket looking-glass with a chimpanzee on the back — a cheap looking-glass for a few sous which Lilian gave me as a souvenir before she left for Nakri-Sosset. Of course, there is something in my face which is not in the best of order. I laugh and throw the looking-glass away into the sand. I don't want to have anything in common with those feverish eyes, those blue lips, that yellow brow covered with beads of sweat. This is not the face of a great hunter who has killed a lion and has given its skin to Silvestra. It is the face of a weak, miserable man. And all my life I have despised weak, miserable men, those wretches who do not carry marshals' batons in their knapsacks.

'Eat, Silvestra,' I say, and this time I can hear my voice. 'Swallow the bite that's in your mouth, come on!' And I laugh and reach out for the chicken.

A marabou has come down on a stone, very near us, and is thoughtfully watching the white table-cloth and Nunu Nhwama's carved up chicken.

WITH A MARSHAL'S BATON IN THE KNAPSACK

June 5, the basin of the Niger

I left Louis Philippe's home early in the morning, before the red glow that precedes the dawn had blazed up in the east. Last night after dinner I told Louis Philippe that I felt my palms itching for a shot, that my gun had become like a young, neglected bride and that I had heard people talk about a place on the Niger where herds of kudus and beisas came in the evening to quench their thirst with the pleasant cool water. Louis Philippe replied that he did not know of any place where herds of kudu and beisa came in the evening, but that there must be such a place and it would surely be at the spot where the river overflowed its banks, because the banks there were low and flat, and formed natural watering-places. I told him I wasn't quite sure that the place was near those flooded areas, but that, if I set out along the course of the river, I was sure to discover it, for, of course, kudu and beisa always gathered at such watering-places. And I added that I might possibly find also zebras there and water buffaloes, and other steppe animals. I wouldn't shoot at a zebra, I said, for I wasn't keen to have a zebra's skin! But a water buffalo, naturally, was something quite different, a buffalo's skin can be used for a thousand purposes. Louis Philippe fell into silence, he was pondering over different things, wondering, perhaps, why I did not care for the striped skins of the zebras, counting over in his mind how many zebras and water buffaloes he had killed so far.

Thus we played a little game of hide and seek last night — he and I. Because the real text of our conversation should have been more or less as follows:

'Louis Philippe, it seems to me that that thorn in my blood is doing its job quite well.'

'Yes, it seems so. . . .'

'Maybe it will finish the job off in two or three days, eh?'

'Judging by your face and your lips, which have grown quite blue, I'm afraid that's about how long it will take — two or three days.'

'That's not a very short time, Louis Philippe.'

'No, it isn't.'

'I don't want you to spend those two or three days worrying about me.'

'I know you don't.'

'I'll beat it. So it will be better for you and for me, too.'

Louis Philippe turned his eyes away.

'I'll go down the course of the Niger. Maybe I'll get a chance of killing some game on my way — beisa or kudu. It'll be a sort of comfort, as a matter of fact.'

'I would be glad to accompany you, so you wouldn't be alone. But I know that you prefer not to take me along.'

'I'd rather be alone, Louis Philippe. Thank you.'

But as we were afraid, I, of arousing his compassion, and he, of hurting my feelings and insulting me with his compassion, we preferred to play at hide-and-seek and to chat foolishly about the watering-places on the Niger, and about kudu and beisa.

Otherwise we understood each other perfectly well, and knew exactly how the matter stood.

And so I sneaked out of Louis Philippe's house while it was still dark, one hour and a half before dawn.

The place I get to, or rather which I have the bodily strength to reach is, perhaps, really a watering-place for kudu and beisa, although there are no hoof-prints on the loose sand. There are no hoof-prints, although the bank is low, so low and flat that it almost reaches the level of the water. I have everything: the shade of two coconut palms behind my back; further down — the ferns, bushes and tough grass at the edge of the jungle, and further on — the lonely, endless silence of the Great Jungle itself. And in front of me there is a strip of golden sand and then the great Niger, with a milky haze over its midstream, with glimmering patches here and there like little mirrors, and the opposite bank, from where the prairie starts, is a flat, desert-steppe world with a grey sky and a misty, grey horizon. I have everything — my hunting carbine lies near my shoulder (may be, after all, a kudu, a thirsty kudu will show up), my knapsack with a few bars of heat-resistant chocolate and a handful of codein concentrate tablets. I have everything, I lack nothing, and a few quiet, calm hours lie ahead of me.

But I am not going to spend them alone, those hours, because I am no recluse, nor a misanthrope with a grudge against the world and mankind. Nor do I want to spend them under a foreign sky and on foreign soil, although the whole sky above the earth and the whole earth are man's homeland, and the good people both of the North and of the South are the friends and brothers of a good man.

I know that is so, but what little healthy blood still remains in my heart wants its own sky, its own land. This is a law, is natural, and now, just now, I have no power to resist it.

And that is why I listen to my heart. I have some accounts to square with it, for I am in debt to it, and I have to settle my accounts quickly while there is still time, because my hours are numbered. And just as it is the custom to have a criminal tried on the spot where he has committed the crime, so I have to pay my debts in the country where I contracted them — in my native country and under my native sky.

I was a student in my first year at the Polytechnical Institute and it happened during the summer holidays.

There was no one to take care any longer of that primitive old flour mill that my father had inherited

from his father, and it was like an old crock of a woman broken down with age, who had stolen away into the bushes to die in solitude and silence. The white millstones were not there — who knows who had found some use for them and how they had been taken away! The bin was missing and the clapper and the big flour trough. Only the room that had had a stove in it remained, but the door was broken and it was enveloped in cobwebs, and the window was smashed in — they had taken away even the iron bars. But as of old, the water went on gurgling and bubbling in the bed of the river, again filling the deep mill-stream hidden away under the shade of the beeches. The water in the mill-stream was deep and quiet and blue. The huge wooden wheel, with the blades which used to churn and foam up the water and fling it about in great splashes as big as your fists, taking your breath away, had long been torn down. Only the axle was there, and you could see it through the floor of the mill, covered over with green moss and in ruins!

The left bank of the rivulet sloped down to the end of the road along which, in the past, those who brought their grain to be ground at our mill used to come. But the right bank rose up high, about ten paces, perhaps, and was overgrown with beeches, hornbeam and hazelnuts. A narrow path meandered between the shrubs and the beeches, leading to an already abandoned felling area, beyond the summer camp of the cattle. Few people passed either along the old way or along this path, especially on weekdays.

That day was a weekday and I did not expect meeting a living soul in climbing up the path — I had intended to take a walk up to the meadows, to the pastures where the cattle grazed in the summer, for the shepherds had invited me to drop in and see them. That is why I was climbing up the path; but I was moving slowly and lazily because of the heat, hesitating whether I shouldn't go back or not. I wasn't very interested either in the shepherds or the cattle, and it was only the wild strawberries that tempted me to go there, for I had heard that there were lots of them in those places.

And so it was that I came up to the mill, but on approaching the mill-stream, I heard laughter and noise coming from below, from the water. If I had heard men's voices, I should surely have walked on without stopping. But the voices that were coming from the mill-stream were women's voices, the ringing laughter of women, or rather of girls.

For a time I stood and listened, hesitating whether I should go and look at them or should choose a place from where I could see them. And I heard them not only laughing and talking from below, but also splashing in the water: they were obviously bathing and swimming and that is why I heard that splashing.

I slipped between two hazelnut trees, bent down and peeped at them.

To my surprise, I saw only two girls, though I had had the impression from their voices that there were more of them. 'They must be five or six,' I had said to myself. But there were no others.

The two girls were already approaching the opposite bank, the lower one, and were swinging their arms noisily in the water and kicking their legs. They were shouting and saying something to each other, but I couldn't catch what they were saying. I saw how their heels and elbows glistened in the sun and how gay little rainbows flashed now and then in the ripples and spray they were splashing up around them. They came out on the bank, wrung the water out of their hair, hopping from one foot to the other, and then they quickly slipped into the mill, as if they had been frightened by something, but I realized at once that their clothes were surely in there, because there were no clothes to be seen on the sand.

It was only then that I looked down at the lower end of the bank below my feet, and I nearly cried out in surprise. I never expected to see anything there; my eyes just happened to look that way. And that is why I nearly cried out, because I did not expect to see anything; the two girls had already gone into the mill and were surely dressing.

Below, on the narrow strip of ground near the bank of the river, stood Magdalena, or Magda as they called her and as everybody called her: Magda. She lived next door to us. Her father, Uncle Stamenko, was a friend of my father's. He often came to our house, I called him uncle in those days and liked him very much, because of his cocky moustache that he used to twist at the ends. As for Magda she was slim and too thin — I saw that she was slim and too thin when I started going to working bees in the evenings in company with other boys, and when, afterwards, we would lie in wait for the girls in the dark and scare them with sudden shouts of 'Hi', jumping and getting hold of them, like my father's hunting dog jumped at partridges. She was skinny and years younger than I was: not at all striking and very plain. I got used to her passing, without taking any notice of her, and stuck to this habit later on, when I became a young man, and she, the little girl, became a grown-up lass. And how was I to notice her, when so many other lasses were making eyes at me, girls whom I did not see every day and who had no objections to waiting for me in the dark themselves. Sometime on meeting her I had a feeling that she was looking at me with too much warmth in her eyes, just as those other girls did with whom I hadn't grown up in the same street, and I felt a coldness towards her in my heart. Maybe I had been spoilt by too much attention, by the ready way in which they proposed I should walk out with them in the evenings, but the other girls were 'girls', they had lips and breasts, while she was always the daughter of Uncle Stamenko, almost a sister or something like a sister, and that is why I never even thought of looking for lips and breasts in her. A brother cannot look for such things in his sister, because he does not look at his sister with the eyes of a man. Maybe that's why I couldn't stand that warmth in her eyes, couldn't accept it at any price, it was somehow alien and left me cold.

It was not only that I kept physically aloof from her; I didn't like her character either. We had once played together — in the street, in the yards behind the houses and in the field; we had met later in the study-circles at the library club and in the youth society. I was self-confident, conscious of my power and used to imposing my will. I was attracted by unusual things, by great difficulties and great tasks. But she was always fanatically steadfast and concentrated in herself, a concentration that I could not stand — apostolic, Christian, or the devil knows what. She always displayed too much modesty, a noiseless diligence, reserve, steadily endeavouring to be one of the four wheels of the cart, but to be considered the fifth. It was just this sort of behaviour that I detested, and I called it 'apostolic', cursing it to myself and missing no opportunity to sneer at it when she was about and could hear me. But even then, when she heard my words, she never dropped her disgusting reserve; she would answer me, and I must confess that her answers were intelligent and to the point, but she never got irritated and answered sneer for sneer.

Once — it was at the time of the mass campaign for the co-operative farms — I proposed that we should go out on a night sally and round up the cattle of those whom we had decided should join the co-operative farm, but who were still kicking against it — that we should forcefully round up their cattle and drive them to the co-operative cattle-sheds.

'There's no room for more cattle there,' Magda said.

'Oh, never mind, we'll make room,' I answered.

'And the forage won't be enough. We've got very little hay!'

'Well, that doesn't matter. We'll cut down the rations.'

'I don't agree!' she said, shaking her head, and then repeated: 'I don't agree. Our cattle will suffer and theirs, too.'

'Well, what do you propose?' I burst out. 'Are we going to wait for them to sell or slaughter their animals?'

She thought a while, and then smiled quietly.

'Why doesn't your father talk to them? They aren't all that bad, and, maybe, they'll understand.'

'Look at the young Christian!' I turned to the young people. 'She only lacks the cloak of the worthy Yoanna. And she boasts of being an activist!'

Yoanna was the only nun you could still see at the little St. Anne Chapel, tucked away in the rocks, overhanging the road leading to the town.

She looked at me, her eyes opening wide: the blow had struck home. 'She deserved it,' I said to myself. 'We're making a revolution, pulling down the kingdom of ownership, and she's afraid lest an ox should go hungry or badly fed, or that some mangy sheep should remain without shelter! . . . 'The young people went with me, whereas she, I remember, did not give in, her head stubbornly raised. But she did not make any noise about it, she argued quietly, even a little sadly, in a way which I hated and found disgusting. It was a quiet stubbornness, but unshakable — like a mountain.

Well, it was she who was standing there below, in front of me, erect, combing her wet hair before a small mirror, which she held in her left hand. I looked at her, thinking that I was dreaming: the plain, unconspicuous Magda, Uncle Stamenko's daughter — she too had fine shoulders, and a bust and a waist and thighs! Drops of water shone on her shoulders and breasts, a green hazelnut leaf was sticking to her right knee. I looked at this white figure without any evil feeling in my blood, and my heart was brimming over with wonder and surprise, for I had discovered something unsuspected and festive in a calendar which I remembered only for its weekdays, a bottle of wonderful ruby wine in an ordinary wooden cupboard.

And maybe I was wondering more at myself, at my former blindness, at my naive, fraternal feelings, when suddenly my eyes met hers — we stared at each other, transfixed; her left hand dropped slowly, very slowly as if somebody was pulling it down by force. The mirror slipped from her fingers, fell on the stones and was shattered to smithereens.

I was the thief, and she — the victim; the thief and his victim stood face-to-face, and both felt terribly awkward. Then she made the gesture that is usual for all women on such occasions. She bent down, as if my eyes were pressing her to the ground, and started receding backwards. When she felt the water with her heels, she squatted down, turned and jumped forward like a ball.

I hastened to get away from the place, but with a certain amount of compunction in my heart. I was in high feather, however, and did not feel the heat, just as if I, too, had just emerged from the coolness of that sunless mill-stream .... Sunless? Who knows? It shone in my memory like a tremendous silver tray, dazzling in the sunlight and sparkling. On this tray the gods had offered me, the infidel, a great joy. When you carry a marshal's baton in your knapsack all the gods in the world, whether in togas or turbans or mantles — all become your orderlies, your obsequious servants. They wear themselves out, positively running their feet off, to offer you a great joy on a silver tray. I was happy, felt fine, and whistled to the birds, as I picked leaves from the hazelnut trees on my way and dropped them along the path.

In half an hour I reached the summer camp — I had almost flown over to it, unconscious of the heights and of the steep slopes.

I met her the following day, on her way to the library club. When she saw me, her cheeks flushed slightly, almost imperceptibly.

'Are you coming to see the rehearsal?' she asked.

They were rehearsing a little play, in which I wasn't at all interested. The rose spots faded away and her cheeks became again what they always were.

'No,' I answered, trying to look into her eyes. And I realized then that these eyes weren't thinking at all about the rehearsal, they said that to me very clearly and unambiguously. But they were whispering something else to me, perhaps the same thing that they had tried many times to make me see before. Only now they whispered it with greater warmth, more intimately, more insistently and, somehow, less diffidently, although those quiet eyes of hers had never been particularly diffident. 'I'm not coming,' I repeated, 'because tomorrow I'm leaving and I have to finish off one or two things.'

How did this ever occur to me? Until a few seconds before, I hadn't thought at all of leaving.

'So you're leaving?' she asked very softly.

If she had asked me her question in a louder voice, and without any minor tones in it, and without that warmth of unpronounced words in her eyes, I would surely have laughed and shaken my head.

'No departure for me!' I would have said.

Such an intention had indeed been crossing my mind — to get away, to leave for somewhere, but that had been on the day before yesterday. Yesterday, yes, just yesterday, I had decided to stay.

'Is that so?' she should have laughed. 'Did you decide that yesterday?' And she should have looked at me again, frankly and openly, without any sentimental outpourings in her eyes. 'Was it not, perhaps, while you were walking past your grandfather's flour mill that the thought of staying on here crossed your mind?'

'I wonder how you guessed,' I should have said, laughing.

She, too, should have laughed aloud, with all her heart, loudly, her breasts shaking under her blouse. After all, I had seen them yesterday when they hadn't been covered with a blouse.

This is how this scene between us should have gone off, and, if it had gone off so, I shouldn't have told her I was leaving.

Why did she have to be always pushing her serious feelings down my throat? And what did I care about her feelings! She could keep them to herself, of course, and play with them, play with them to her heart's content — that was her own business. I had other things to think about.

She was demanding a high price for what had happened yesterday! But for me, my dear, yesterday's happening was just a pleasant discovery. And in fact what else could it be?

'Yes, I have to leave,' I repeated. 'I'm tired of wasting my time on useless things.'

That is how we parted.

The following morning, while going to the station in a cabriolet, I looked with delight at the large new wheat fields, at the green sea of maize, and I enjoyed the world, for it was beautiful, and I loved it. I did not think at all about Magda, Uncle Stamenko's girl. But even if I had thought about her, I should probably have recalled something of what I had seen at the mill-stream the day before yesterday, and it did not seem worth while thinking too much about such things.

It so happened that for several summers I did not go to our village. I had gone to specialize abroad, and had taken part in expeditions which did their work thousands of miles away from our Marina Bara, prospecting for ore deposits beyond the tundra and studying the boundless steppes and the sand deserts in the south of the USSR. I had become familiar with the boundlessness of space — unfathomable to the eye; familiar with the resistance of the earth, of the morasses, of the waterless areas. We discovered great new deposits, that would benefit man; the ore and the new deposits gladdened my heart, but what filled it with the greatest joy were our triumphs over space, our triumphs over difficulties, our crusades against the morasses that were ready to swallow up our bodies and the sands that scorched them. In the north, amid the mosses, interwoven like felt mats, amid the miserable grey-blue lichen and amid the ice-covered wastelands of those areas where rivers had overflown their banks, when the red column of the thermometer sank to below 50°C, I first asked myself the question: 'Shall I hold out?' Then, later, I asked myself the question: 'Shall I discover the ore?' And then, when I had discovered it, I said to myself: 'I did hold out,' intoxicated by the joy of having held out in the battle against the 50°C, and of having conquered the frozen earth's crust. My joy at the discovery, at finding the vein of ore which I had 'scented' and 'caught' was also great and solemn in a way, and brought its laurels, but it came after the other, my first joy.

I came back home hardened, a grown-up man returning as it were from a victorious war: I had taken part in big battles with nature, with its inhospitality and with its secrets, and that meant something, after all. It is one thing to lather your face and to have the water on your cheek turn into ice and still to shave every morning; it is quite a different thing to do this at home with the hot water from the boiler, or in front of your tent on a meadow covered with curly grass, fragrant with crane's bill and freshly besprinkled with silvery dew. There is a difference, certainly, and the fifty degrees below zero is preferable, and the pits, too, dug deep into the sand, where in one hour you can hardly fill your black alluminium pannikin with water. My experience gained on that front did mean something, after all, and that is why, when I got my job in the institute, a little after I got it, I was appointed head of its research and exploratory section — a post which one usually takes after long years of service. Some envied me, but I thought that my post wasn't so very important, for at first I had the feeling of wading through shallow waters. But I got used to it and, with the passing of the months and years, I realized and became convinced that even in the shallows there are deep places here and there, ample water for a great swimmer.

In guiding the work of the section to which, because I loved it, I devoted much attention, I gradually acquired new habits and ideas in addition to those I had got from my father, and through the years they accumulated in my character, and they were not different from my first ideas, but were akin to them. Thus, for instance, as head of my section, I became a passionate admirer of the big bold step — I had no taste for petty initiatives, and disliked unsteady plans and timid and hesitant experiments. There was nothing wrong in the big step, just the contrary! But by succumbing to what had been accumulated in my consciousness, I sometimes allowed myself to be carried away by my passion, distant goals intoxicated me like strong wine and I kept my eyes fixed on them, looking into the distance. And I said to myself that those who did not see these goals and did not aspire to reach them were men who did not carry marshal's batons in their knapsacks, people whose souls were indifferent and in whose consiousness our great epoch was not reflected.

I worked out a criterion of my own about the faculties, physical and mental, of my associates, and it was based on the faculties of the strongest, of those most amply endowed by nature. I was too keen, impatient for rapid successes, and did not wait for the people to get hardened and learn, to acquire the strength of the strongest and the wisdom of the wisest, gradually and systematically. I pressed the accelerator pedal all the time, requiring that everyone should surpass himself in some magical way at once; I demanded of weak men what only the strongest and best steeled could do, and I could not and did not make compromises in this respect and showed no sympathy.

I remember that during one rough winter we had to probe a rocky, high, barren mountain site by drilling. I imagined that I was, in fact, the head of the group of drillers and asked myself.

'Now long will it take you, for instance, to get through with this?'

And I replied to myself:

'Ten days,' adding, 'not a day longer.'

In every member of the group I saw myself. And all the drillers in the group agreed that the job could be done in ten days.

That is why in the upper left hand corner of the order I wrote: 'The site to be probed in ten days, as from...', and signed it.

The Party secretary came in and cast a surprised glance at me:

'But do you really think...'

'Yes, I do!' I interrupted, spreading out my hands 'Do you know,' I told him, 'that if I were on this job I'd get through with it not in ten but in five days? At the most in five days. Let the chief allow me to head the group, and you'll see that I won't need even five days!'

'But the cold weather....'

'Do you imagine that I've not taken it into consideration in my calculations?'

I had taken it into consideration, of course, the cold, but I had had in mind my own toughness, and my own training. I had worked at fifty degrees below zero, climbed glaciers, spent many nights in ice-covered plains. I did put the hard winter into the account, and then made a 'discount' and thus my conscience as an expert was clean. I failed to take only one thing into consideration (it simply never occurred to me) — that in making the 'discount' and in determining how big it should be, I had had myself in mind, my own capacity and experience.

The head of the group — we used the familiar Bulgarian form of 'thou' when speaking to each other, and sometimes played chess together — came to my study early the following morning, holding the order in his hand, smiling and tapping that corner with his fingers where I had set the dead-line for the probing. He was looking into my eyes, saying nothing, only tapping that corner with his fingers and pointing to the term I had set for the exploratory boring. And then, somehow, I forgot all about our chess tournaments and that, in speaking to him, I was wont to use the familiar Bulgarian form of 'thou' and that once I had had supper at his home, when his family were celebrating the tenth birthday of his son. And his wife was a nice woman, gay and softly feminine, but I forgot her, too, as I looked at him tapping with the finger on which was his wedding ring, at the corner where I had fixed the dead-line.

'What do you want?' I snapped. 'Is the order not clear enough, or what?'

His face became taut, he paused for a while.

'I thought there might be a mistake?' he said, attempting a smile, as if both of us were sitting over the chessboard and he was pressing on slyly with his attack, preparing to hit me in the flank and take my queen, but at the same time not very pleased at the thought of seeing me beaten. He was a good and considerate man.

I got up, lit a cigarette (without offering him one as I usually did).

'There's no mistake,' I said. And because I felt something seething in my heart, I added: 'Maybe you're afraid of catching a chill up there, or a cold in the head, eh?'

'Change it to twenty days,' he said. 'Twenty, and not a day longer, please. Although even twenty days...' he waved his hand without finishing his sentence.

'So that's it?' I replied. 'You refuse to go?'

'No, God forbid!' he again attempted to smile. 'I only want to say that in ten days it's impossible, it is impossible to probe the site in ten days in such weather!' He nodded towards the window. The window pane was covered with ice, the cold had woven a white pattern on it, flowers of ice.

'The weather is an obstacle for cowards and pigeon-hearts,' I said, crushing my cigarette into the ash tray. 'There's always something in the way of cowards and pigeon-hearts. Give me the order!' And I pulled the document out of his hands. 'You're free to go,' I said, quickly and impatiently turning over the file of papers that lay in front of me.

Then I came out with a proposal to the managing board to have him punished. I defended my proposal with sound arguments, but the chief of department did not seem to be particularly convinced, although he did not reject any of my arguments: he asked for clemency, and the punishment was reduced to a mild reprimand.

My friend left for the site. They got through with the exploratory drilling in fourteen days — with a delay of four days, because the weather was rotten for the job, indeed, it was snowing all the time. We had a few mishaps! The right hand of one of the drillers froze and they had to amputate his forefinger and middle finger at the hospital. The head of the group, my friend, only lost his left ear. But it seems that he himself was

to blame for it — for he had neglected to rub it with snow now and then, as you have to do in such cold weather.

Four days — well, it wasn't a delay long enough to justify my asking for the whole group to be punished. And the chief of our department was not inclined to mete out punishments. Our chief carried no marshal's baton in his knapsack, he was a wavering sort of chap, who in decisive moments, could not withstand the promptings of his heart and displayed sentimentality. But, anyhow, my friend and I no longer sat over our game of chess; whenever we talked, he used the polite Bulgarian form of 'you', and not the intimate 'thou'. He used the polite from of 'you', although I had forgiven him already and had forgotten his pigeon-heartedness and fear. On St. Nicholas Day, when his wife celebrated her name-day, I went to their house, uninvited, with a bouquet of chrysanthemums and a big chocolate cake. There were other guests and he was busy with them and talking heartily with them and entertaining them, but his behaviour towards me was cold. I felt like telling him: 'Come now, I've forgotten that incident, stop sulking with me!' — because I wasn't rancorous. But he avoided me and the kind words I intended to say to him remained unspoken. On the other hand, his wife, rosier than ever in her pink silk dress, with lots of frills and laces and ribbons, which made her look still more softly feminine, did a lot to make up for her husband's bad conduct. The dear little woman! Why, I bore her husband no malice. I only pitied him. It wasn't everybody's lot to march forward with big bold strides and to carry a marshal's baton in his knapsack. I hardly ever used to entrust this man with big, important tasks, and he would get no important promotion in his job — at least while I was his chief. That's what I said to myself that evening, yet I danced with his wife, clinked glasses in drinking toasts with her, and drained the cup. 'And if I weren't his boss,' I said to myself, 'the devil could take him — I'd propose to her that we should meet the day after tomorrow, or I would tell her something that would make her look still rosier in her pink silk dress

He deserves such a lesson for having let his ear freeze at only twenty degrees below zero, if for nothing else.'

It so happened that I spent one month of my leave in my village and then I learned, in a casual conversation, that Magdalena had married the former accountant on the co-operative farm, who was now a planner in the county town. They had got married more than three years before, had left the village, and were well-off there in town, but there were rumours that their marriage wasn't happy, that there was something wrong with their family life, goodness only knows why, and the outcome of the marriage looked very doubtful.

I listened, sympathized with Magdalena, for we had grown up together in the same street, separated only by two houses. But whenever I remembered her eyes and those warm feelings I saw in them, I always felt like laughing: even if her husband had been a lyrical poet, he would have got fed up with her, let alone the poor accountant and planner, in whom there was not as much lyricims as there was in the soul of a computor. Anyhow, I sympathized with her and had not forgotten my discovery at the mill-stream, when I had stood among the hazel-bushes, watching her comb her hair and when our eyes had met. I remembered this incident, smiling, because it was full of life, but I passed on, losing it out of my sight, like a traveller who loses sight of the gay little houses in the vineyards past which the train is flying.

I had worries, and they were serious. My biggest worry was my chief — that cautious, careful man for whom daring experiments and big steps were not to his liking. He was like those card players who stay out of the game, and do not take a hand in it, unless they have a sequence of at least three cards in the same suit served to them. If he was forced to enter the game and take a risk without those three cards, woe to his partners! He reasoned, pondered, calculated, took precautions against surprises and if, in the middle of the game, he failed to make a hit, even though he still held a few trumps among his cards, he threw in the sponge and acknowledged defeat; he hadn't the guts to stand

up to reverses and hold out hoping for an unexpected turn. On the other hand, when he knew that something was 'possible', or reasonable, and when he had put his signature to a project, you could move mountains, but you couldn't move him. And then the whole institute from the director down to the technicians at the drills and the ordinary workers knew that the authority of the establisment was at stake, but that it was absolutely sure to come out with flying colours.

I hated him — for his sake I had always to hide my light and my searching under a bushel, to limit my experiments to what was indisputable and absolutely real. He wanted his men to be experienced and staid soldiers. I was striving to reach the distant horizons, while he shut off even that which was only a stone's throw out of my sight. However, I wasn't the kind of man who could get reconciled to a chief who hindered me like this: the blood of my father, Daskala, ran in my veins; I had taken the Marina Bara out of its hidden den; I had turned the wheel of the drill at a temperature of 50°C, below zero and my hands had discovered several veins of ore. After all, in the name of the Great Good, you could send a narrow-minded manager to hell! A narrow-minded manager makes the road to the Great Good infinitely longer, because he is afraid of a frontal attack, of the big strides directed towards this goal, this Great Good. He goes round and round it, wavers, listens, takes his time and waits, until people get fed up with the Great Good, which they discern in the distance, magnificent and stupefying, like the Pyramid of Cheops. It was such men as my chief, who had blocked the approach to the pyramid with their backs, and who prevented people from soaring through the air to its foundations on Ikar's wings, driven now with atomic fuel. To hell with this manager! It was worth your while a thousand times to get such a manager removed from your way, or just pushed to one side.

But he liked me very much, and that was what was horrible, disgusting. His eyes, always tired and swollen under his red eyelids, smiled at me in a friendly way. Whenever I entered his study he would invite me to take a seat in the best armchair and would try to make me feel at home. He listened silently to my objections, protests, my counter-proposals, my hypotheses, nodding and smiling at me in an encouraging way. Then he would tell me, blast him, that I was a fine fellow, a very fine fellow, but dangerous, and if some of my habits and some traits in my character were not smoothed down with a sharp file, and if some of my aspirations were not pried off with pincers, it would be a pity for my talents and for the money which the state had spent in making a man out of me....

He did not understand, this manager, with his fat neck and with the little yellow bags under his eyes, with his Paleozoic principles and his methods of work inherited from the Mesozoic period — he did not understand and it never occurred to him that I hated him, that I was watching every step that he took and waiting for my hour to strike.

Magdalena.... A gay little house amid the vineyards, where the trains rush past.

The copper works had to be supplied with larger quantities of ore: the ore they were getting was not enough, the shops were working below capacity, production was marking time and could not be stepped up. The Government sounded the alarm, the minister in charge mobilized the Institute. Within short terms, as quickly as possible, new deposits had to be discovered, rich deposits of copper ore.

We went around, toured several mountainous regions and valleys, and when we got back we shut ourselves up in our studies, drew up projects and presented them to the managing board for approval. In the evening before we submitted our projets, my chief, Peter Ivanov, rang me up most unexpectedly.

'If you're not in a hurry to go, come to my study,' his voice rang over the wire in the receiver.

'All right,' I nodded, 'I'm in a hurry, but I'll drop in for a minute.'

From his drawer he produced a box of cheap chocolates, offered them silently to me, then put the box back into its place.

'This is my project,' he said, pointing to the table at which we all used to sit at our conferences. Typewritten pages, drawings, topographical maps, manuals, with covers, grown yellow with age, lay scattered on the green table-cover. Those manuals were miserable, indeed, for they looked old, smelt of the past and of many other naive things. 'This is my project,' he repeated. 'Sit down, look it over, and if you have any remarks to make, make them. I'll listen.'

He seated himself in his armchair, stretched out his legs and yawned noisily. A minute later he was quietly snoring. His cheeks hung down, puffily, and his whole face looked like a grey, deflated football.

There was logic, precision, academic perfection in his project, but there was a fundamental weakness: The author seemed utterly unacquainted with the latest geophysical and radiometric correctives in examining the symptoms of the probable presence of ore deposits. I made some rough calculations: if these correctives were applied to the project, it would bring the places which he proposed for experimental sounding very close to my sector, to the sector which I had in mind for investigation.

'Any remarks?' I suddenly heard his tired bass behind me.

'Remarks?' I replied, pausing for a while. Then I got up from the chair and shrugged my shoulders sleepily. 'There may be some mistakes,' I said, 'but I find it difficult to think now, I'm too tired. Tomorrow, at the sitting...' I yawned again, making for the door. 'Tomorrow, at the sitting,' I smiled to myself, 'you'll crumble down, you Paleozoic, fossilized relic, you're not going to be in my way any longer and I'll no longer be like a hobbled horse.'

'I can see your project and help you, if I can,' my chief spoke behind me. 'I should like us to make a good impression on the managing board,' he added.

I stopped for a second and that evil little smile froze in my heart.

'Come, don't become sentimental!' I thought, spurring myself on.

'Thank you', I nodded, 'thank you for your kind feelings.'

'What feelings, my dear chap, leave feelings out of the question. We're in a tight spot .... That's why.'

'Precisely,' I agreed with him on the matter of feelings.

'That's why we'll talk at greater length tomorrow to the board of managers.'

And I wished him good night.

Because I went to bed in a good mood, my dreams were fine. Before I went to sleep I saw in my mind how my drill 'No. 3' on which I counted the most, produced a big piece of ore, while the drill was not yet deep in the earth. Though it seemed to be the most ordinary copper ore, it shone like polished copper and even brighter than that, like gold. 'See what happens when that guy's no longer hindering you. It's just ordinary copper, but it shines like gold.' There were many people around, in the meadows and on the slopes and some had climbed the trees, so that the green beeches looked like huge clusters of grapes. All were shouting hurrah and cheering, though their voices could not be heard, but they waved their hands, handkerchiefs and hats with enthusiasm, as if they were at a great meeting. But everything was much more solemn and more beautiful. 'See what happens,' I was saying to myself, 'when that guy's gone by the board and is no longer interfering with my work. Now I don't look, and never will look again, like a hobbled horse!'

Next day at the conference with the board of managers, I took the floor and smashed his project to smithereens. I pointed out that my chief was not well enough acquainted with the latest correctives in establishing the geological set up. Geochemistry and the new radiometrical methods of prospecting had brought many new elements into the charting of the actual and probable area of ore deposits. If he had taken into consideration these new methods and the geological terrain which he proposed for probing, he would surely have come closer to, would even have fallen just on some sectors in the region, which I had marked out in

my project. The southernmost arches of the two regions, I pointed out, had the selfsame theoretical tangent. which meant that my chief was proposing to end the probing at just those points where it should, in fact, begin. He had been confused by a landslide that had been caused by erosion, devoid of surface deposits, and mineralizing sources had made him hesitant.

He was listening, rubbing his red eyelids and casting side glances at me, with a smile on his face which, who knows why, I did not find malicious.

Well, the Director of the Institute agreed with my arguments — he was a daring chief, a scientist with an international reputation, but he suffered from a liver complaint and always looked a little melancholy and apathetic. He heaved a sigh, paused, then waved his hand and proposed that we should pass on to item two on the agenda — the discussion of my project.

There were many geologists, engineers, physicists, chemists, experts in all kinds of drilling and research work, and honoured drillers at the conference, and they all, including my chief, agreed with my proposal that sites Nos 1 and 2 should be sounded; but site No. 3, on which I had pinned my greatest hopes and staked all, remained 'hanging in the air,' and no one backed me up. My chief simply trampled it down, rolled over it like a tank, and proclaimed it to be nothing but 'magma' boiling with frivolous, fantastic ideas, veiled in smoke.

'Give us more facts,' the Director remarked, 'support your hypothesis with more categorical data.' He smiled in a friendly way, but it was obvious that I had failed to convince him.

Facts! I knew better than anyone else that I needed them, but I did not have them. My conviction was based on theoretical premises, on secondary symptoms, on signs negligible in number and insignificant. It was mostly based on that instinct in my blood, which was born of experience, of what I had gone through. It came from the world of observations, which I carried stowed away and piled up in my memory.

'Will you be able to add some more data to your documentation in a week's time?' the Director asked me with sympathy.

'Yes, I will,' I replied promptly, although I knew perfectly well that I had nothing more to add.

And this is now how I met Magdalena at that time.

I was on my way back from my site No. 3. That was in the afternoon of the sixth day of the term I had been given. I hadn't been able to put down a single new 'fact' in my notebook. My ill success irritated me: I had to do my utmost to persuade, convince and prove to my chiefs that there was at least a grain of reality in the 'magma' of fantastic and frivolous ideas, which I had put forward. 'So much the worse for them,' I said to myself. 'My hour will strike and then I'll show them that there is no room for pigeon-hearted people in modern science, and let them go to hell and make way for the strong men ....' As if Magellan had set out to discover his strait on the basis of preliminary facts and documents! 'Is the Great Good going to continue to escape our eyes somewhere in the distance, for another hundred years?' I said to myself, 'Unattainable as a mirage, if we go on creeping towards it with the heavily moving machine of only tested facts and obvious proofs and do not send forward the most daring inspiration on reconnaissance, giving full rein to the courageous and the manly to choose the shortest path!'

It was in such a tense and militant mood that I was driving my jeep, and the weather was hot and close and full of the smell of tar from the softened asphalt. That is why, when I approached the textile workers' holiday house — a sunny building, like a cheerful and gay-coloured chocolate box surrounded with meadows and acacia copses — I drew up in the shade, lit a cigarette, and set out for the courtyard of the holiday house along a wide, paved lane, to have a drink of cold water and splash my face.

She was sitting by the fountain on a wooden bench, painted white, and she was reading a book. The long green catkins of the low branching willow, under which

the white bench was nestling, reached down almost to her head and shoulders. A woman reading a book, a sentimental tree, a fountain with four bubbling spouts — it was all so trite: an outdated bedroom picture. My heart was torn with anger, I did not feel at all like chatting with women, who wasted their time on sentimental little books. I even thought of acting like a boor and passing without greeting her with the customary 'good afternoon.' I was simply exasperated with those pedants and their 'obvious' symptoms and 'irrefutable' proofs. To hell with them! If only my hour would strike, if only once the hands of my clock would come to lie over each other on the figure twelve! I didn't know what the director was going to decide at the last minute, but I had heard that liver complaints made people sceptical. The woman raised her head and looked at me; there are women who sit, on purpose, on benches by the side of fountains, so that thirsty travellers will greet them with a 'good afternoon!'

'Good afternoon!'

But God only knows whether I spoke the words out loud or not. Maybe I said nothing. Maybe I only intended saying something, but in fact said nothing.

The woman rose from the bench at once, her left hand again, as in the past, reaching down, as if at a command.

'Hallo!' she said softly and, as it seemed to me, somewhat embarrassed.

And she stretched out her hand to me.

'Oh!' I said, 'what a surprise!'

We kept hold of each other's hands, as people who are in love do in the pages of sentimental novels. She was dressed in a white, a pure white dress, cut low at the shoulders and arms.

'What a big, grown-up woman you have become!' I could not help saying.

At this moment it seemed that both of us remembered something, because I smiled (a wily smile, surely), while she blushed all over and looked aside. And the remembrance of that thing did not seem to be disagreeable to her, for although she looked away, I noticed that her eyes brightened and were smiling. In the past her eyes could not and dare not smile like that.

As for those men there, who wanted me to give them obvious symptoms and proofs, they could wait another few hours, and the devil take them! After all, this was only the sixth day of my term, and I had still the seventh day left.

The little house amid the lovely vineyards was before my eyes now, reminding me of the sunny hill, the poppies and the intoxicating fragrance of wild thyme, blossoming elder and wormwood.

This is what I learned, while we sat on the smooth grass in the light shade of the acacia copse.

After she had got married to that man, they had left for the county town where he was appointed cashier at a big factory for canned vegetables and half-processed meat products. A few months later she discovered that the fellow was stealing and swindling, and although she was his wife, she told him that if he went on doing that she would give him away. The fellow cut up rough and, in his rage and madness, kicked her in the stomach — and she was pregnant. She had to have an abortion at the hospital and this nearly cost her her life. She recovered, but something happened during the operation, so no one could tell whether she would ever be able to have another child. She rented a room, lived like that — neither married nor divorced — for a few months, and then became friends with one of the teachers at the evening secondary school, and decided to file a petition for divorce. Well, I remembered that it wasn't like her to act in haste, and she waited for things to quieten down and get settled. She waited also for the investigation of those thefts about which she had, in due time, informed both the Party organization and the public prosecutor.

The cashier was sent to prison for three years, but the divorce case was settled to her disadvantage. Some witnesses, the court said, had proved that she had 'gone about' with the other man, the teacher at the evening secondary school, before she had left her husband and while she had still been living with him. That was why she was declared the guitly party in the divorce proceedings. She was proclaimed as a woman guitly of immoral conduct. They punished the evening school teacher, transferring him to another town, as an example to all but it was soon obvious that he had taken to his heels and disappeared, because he stayed in that town for only a couple of months and then vanished, and neither she nor their mutual acquaintances knew where he had gone.

Such had been her start in life — hampered from the very beginning with unexpected and unsuspected obstacles.

Then she had entered the district textile technical school, finished it *cum laude*, gone to Sofia and got a job at the Textile Star Factory. One of the engineers, a bachelor somewhat advanced in years, had made a very correct, very polite proposal of marriage to her, and she had accepted it, because she could no longer make a free choice: her official file contained the statement, written in black and white, that she had been divorced from her husband because of her adultery. A woman with such a file, naturally, couldn't afford to pick and choose, couldn't afford to hesitate, even if the would-be bridegroom was on the wrong side of fifty.

But I mustn't, for goodness sake, imagine that she was complaining of her husband. He was quiet and considerate, came straight home from the local pub where he took his appetizer, was very particular about the way the table was laid and liked hot and highly seasoned soups. He went early to bed, rose early, and on Sunday evenings took her out to a restaurant. What did I imagine, anyway!

She laughed out loud to lend a happy note to her laughter, but I saw the tears in the corners of her eyes and looked away.

It was now my turn, and although I did not feel like talking, I told her in brief about my work at the Institute and about those lily-livered guys who still had no faith in my wonderful site No. 3.

'Don't give in' she said, putting her hand over mine. 'Insist on having your own way till the last, if you think you are right!'

'Do you doubt that I am right?' I asked, helping her to get up.

She did not reply. She only smiled.

We walked about for a long time, remembering the hills, the maize which reached up to our shoulders and our clear, gambolling, canny Marina Bara.

In the evening I went to her room. She was waiting for me and was not at all uneasy in my presence, because she carried that old memory in her heart.

Then, when I recalled that the next day was the seventh of my term, the dead line, I told her that I had to hurry and that I would drop in again to see her here at the holiday house in two or three days at the latest.

I went out and on the threshold I collided with a figure that was hiding behind the door.

'Eavesdropping, eh?' I cursed and hit out at the figure.

The figure let out a terrible shriek, and I realized that I had hit a woman.

MORE ABOUT THE BATON

June 6, at the same place on the Niger

Yesterday a little before dusk, maybe half an hour before that pink light flooded the world, I killed a kudu. It showed up just at the bend, at about fifty paces from my camp. It appeared all of a sudden, although I had been expecting it to come. It was white, with slanting, forked horns and a short little tail — like a child's toy. I took aim at its shoulder blade and pressed the trigger, while it was lowering its muzzle towards the water. When the smoke cleared away there was no kudu — only a motionless white spot shone like a label on the brown sand.

'In an hour or two the Strong One will surely arrive,' I said to myself, 'the spotted leopard; and he will take the kudu away into the bushes and will eat it up for supper, which will be a plentiful supper as befits the Strong One.'

I should have done the same thing if I had been hungry, if I had felt like eating. But I wanted nothing, for I felt over-satiated. I wanted nothing, I had everything I needed. I closed my eyes and wished the spotted beauty, the Strong One, a pleasant meal!

Before and after midnight. Maybe June 7

Well, the question about site No. 3 was decided by the Director. He signed the order sadly and, somehow, against his will, reluctantly. He took the money which would be needed from the other two sites! Well, hang it all, I was saying to myself, Magellan discovered his straight by sailing round in a wooden trough, in a shallow wooden shell with miserable sails. I pressed the director's hand hard, and then felt ashamed, for his hand was flabby, small and sickly cool. Maybe I shouldn't have shaken it so vigorously.

After a month of strenuous work the drills I had placed in the perimeters of the two sites — No. 1 and No. 2 — began to take out samples; the copper was in negligible quantities, but still there was a certain percentage of copper in them. The drill, the only one that was boring the earth in the perimeter of site No. 3, was producing no hopeful result, at least as far as copper was concerned.

Autumn came and the rains set in. Mist began to veil the mountain peaks and creep down the slopes, covering the meadows, the black naked crowns of the trees that stuck out like crosses, like sepulchral signs under the soaken, leaden sky. Moisture, water, cold, the smell of decaying dry foliage — that was how the world looked in those late autumn days and nights.

The shack that served as our headquarters, stood in the centre of the three perimeters, in a meadow which was gay in summer, covered with lush grass and surrounded with mighty spruce trees, among which dainty young pines were huddled. Now, in the rain, this meadow looked gloomy and cheerless, seemed wild, and the pines were like those poor girls in the fairy tales, cast out by their step-mothers into the desolate waste, far away from the world.

Two of us lived in the shack. My companion was a technician, an expert driller, a strong vigorous young man, to whom everything came easy and who was always humming some ring dance melody, such as 'Donka was weaving aprons', or 'There's no one like Pena' — his unchangeable repertory, in sunshine and in rain, always one and the same till you were sick of it, till you were sick of his 'There's no end to life's worries, so let's join in a gay little chain dance'.

Besides the drills, my Alexander saw to the books, the office work, the payrolls, the camp telephone and was also chief of personnel. I made him also do the work of those in our headquarters, whom I used to send to help the people working at site No. 3. He never grumbled, managed to do everything with perfect ease, and Donka went on weaving her aprons.

Inside, the shack was filled with the smell of wet pineboards, cigarettes had a bitter taste and the tobacco smoke crept along the dirt floor, which looked as if it were heavy with moisture. The big raindrops no longer pattered against the two small windows, those voluble raindrops which carried you away into a healthy and restful sleep. A steady, monotonous, fine drizzling rain was falling, reminding us of the coming snows and driving away our sleep.

Here is a diary of those days (does it make any difference that it wasn't written at that time?):

October 31. It goes on raining. Alexander has come back from the site sourer than ever before. Donka has ceased weaving her aprons. Three of the drillers have said they will quit: they have been worried of late by the irregular payment of their wages. I rang up the central office. The bookkeeper refuses to 'transform' some paragraphs into others. He says it's illegal. The 'working wages fund' is utterly exhausted. I rang up the director, after speaking to the bookkeeper. The director replied: 'Take the drill away from the site.' I said to him: 'Let me take workers from the other two sites.' He replied, 'Don't do foolish things: you can go to prison for such wilful actions!'

Then Alexander asked: 'Shall I make some tea?' I didn't answer. I was asking myself: 'Should I, in spite of everything, call some of the workers from the other sites?' And suddenly I burst out, unable to keep my nerves under control: 'Go to hell with your tea!'

Finally I lay down on the plank-bed and closed my eyes. Alexander poked the fire in the sheet-iron stove, and Donka started weaving her aprons again and is still weaving them.

November 1. The senior mechanic came in, wet and covered with mud. Those three men left. They just flung their bags over their shoulders and beat it. When he told me, I asked which men were working at the drill now — as if I didn't know. The senior mechanic who in the last ten years has always worked at drills, explained when I asked, although he knows that the whole picture is perfectly clear to me: only three men are working at the drill now, he and two more. So, I nodded, 'We need at least one more man, to keep the drill going,' the mechanic added, wiping away the streamlets of water running down his neck. 'One more man,' I nodded, 'all right!' as if that man lay hidden in my cigarette case, and I could offer him, just as I would say: 'Have a cigarette.' Where can I get him from, now that the cursed paragraph is utterly exhausted....

The mechanic stood up to go. But before banging the door behind him he said, among other things, that he and the other two were not so very particular about those wages, and that they would go on drilling steadily until they had eaten up all the beans and rusks they had tucked away in their cases. But they needed one more pair of hands.

I sat looking for a long time at the wooden door, grown dark with the moisture, and I had the feeling that the senior mechanic was still there, on the threshold. I turned to Alexander and told him: 'Rake up whatever cans there are in the chest and take them to them!' But Alexander had already opened the lid of the chest, whistling away to himself and rummaging about at the bottom. 'How many are there?' I asked. He laughed: 'Three cans of peas!'

The same day, in the afternoon. There is a mist, and again that disgusting, drizzling rain. At three o'clock, when it was growing dark, the telephone rang. They asked me from site No. 1 whether I needed a worker, but one who was wearing a skirt. Stavrev, my deputy at site No. 1, a young engineer and unmarried, was at the other end of the line. 'What kind of a woman is she?' I asked. 'Fine looking, very pretty!' Stavrev laughed, his voice hit my ear. 'She's looking for work and asking for you!' Let her go to hell, and you too!' I said, banging down the receiver. Those three men at the drill are in need of a pair of hands and that fellow offers me a wandering prostitute. Such people ought to be torn to pieces by wolf-dogs. I am simply boiling with rage. Those on site No. 1 have it easy, and that is why they feel like making feeble jokes. They are pleased with their one per cent of copper in the ore, with that miserable one per cent, and are eating their bread and cheese with wolfish appetites.

November 3. Had a telephonogram from the Director, ordering me to remove the drill from site No. 3 at once. It's an order!

As soon as I got it, I opened our only bottle of brandy that has lain unopened in the chest among the papers and payrolls, and I gulped down a few mouthfuls. Then I lay down on the plank-bed, the hay rustling under the blanket. I remembered that we had mown it two months before. We had been so gay when we spread it in several layers over the boards! Donka had just begun weaving her aprons. And now I am lying and close my eyes. For the last two days Alexander has been avoiding looking me straight in the eyes. Of what can he be feeling guilty?

The same day, a little later

The damned telephone! Well, after five o'clock it would stop ringing once for all, hidden away in the chest. I raised the receiver and heard Alexander's voice which was so loud that it would have surely roused the dead. 'What?' I asked and the earth seemed to be swaying under my feet. It was swaying and not from the brandy that I had drunk. 'Hurrah!' Alexander was shouting. 'We've drilled out a piece as big as a fist! It contains at least five per cent, at least five per cent of copper! The chief says that at most there may be a difference of plus or minus one! At least five per cent, at least five! Hallo, that means four or six!'

I don't remember whether I hung up the receiver or not.

The distance to the drill was about a mile and a half.

That same day (I don't remember the hour)

They were squatting about the fire, but when they saw me, they shouted out with one voice, waving their hands and caps. One figure alone sat motionless by the fire. We hugged each other, I and Alexander, who ran up to me first, then I shook hands with the mechanic, in the way that men do. And then, looking over his shoulder, I was better able to see that sitting figure. And the earth swayed under my feet for the second time that day. And it was not from the brandy either(it had long since evaporated out of my blood), nor from the joy which was welling up in my heart and bathing it in warmth. And who knows why I thought first of Alexander: so that was why he had been avoiding my eyes these last two days. By the fire sat Magdalena, poking the ashes with a stick, with an air of indifference.

The same day, in the evening

Alexander lighted the sheet-iron stove, brought in a big pile of wood and then told me that he would drop in at site No. 1, to make the people there green with envy by telling them of our high percentage of copper. And he winked at me slyly: 'Well, don't worry about me, boss, I shan't come back until tomorrow morning.'

Magdalena and I were left alone. She was wearing a cotton dress and a sports jacket, and was wet to the skin, her shoes covered with mud. She was coughing badly, a dry cough, and often seemed short of breath, and her lips were quivering. The quiet smile on them was quivering, too, the smile which I had known so well ever since the days when we used to play at blind man's buff in their yard. But the smile and the lips quivered now like the withered, quite withered flower of the stork's bill.

I gave her whatever clothes I had, to change into. The fire was burning in the stove and the disgusting rain outside continued to fall, making little runnels run down the window panes.

Like Alexander, I was fussing about the room now, trying to do something, to busy myself with something. And just as he had avoided my eyes, I avoided meeting hers. And she, while trying to restrain her cough, told me in a few simple words what I did not, but should know.

I surely remembered that night at the holiday house. I had hardly left when a scandal broke out, like a thunderstorm, and even worse than a thunderstorm. We had been followed at every step, they had seen me in the room and had seen that we turned out the light. At the cry of that woman, many people thronged into the corridor. Two women entered her room, calling her all kinds of names, and they pushed her out, dressed only in her night-gown. Others brought the manager, and a statement of the case was drawn up on the spot. The manager afterwards told her that he was sorry, but asked her to put herself in his position and to understand that he was obliged — his post simply obliged him — to watch over the moral conduct of the holiday-makers and the authority and good name of his house. The official statement of the case was sent to the textile factory, where she was working, and the factory sent a copy of it to her husband. Her husband gave her a sound drubbing, telling her that she was to confess to her guilt at the general meeting of the trade union, after which he would decide whether he would let her stay in the house or throw her out like a rag as she deserved.

But she told him that she did not even think of confessing to anything anywhere, that she did not rue what she had done and that she herself would file a petition for divorce. As a matter of fact, while she had been waiting for me in her room, she had already decided the question herself about her divorce.

Then she had gone to live with a friend, sure that I should not fail to come and find her as I had promised....

Later, when all her money was spent, she had gone out to look for work, but it was no easy matter to find regular work with such a dirty official file.

Thus, she had finally got to the Mining and Geological Research Institute. She had been told that there they were always in need of ordinary workers, and the personnel department had sent her to site No. 2. From site No. 2 they sent her to site No. 1. When Stavrev had been speaking to me over the telephone, she had been there, by his desk. It had become clear to her that I was the chief of these sites and that at site No. 3 they were short of workers, but that I should, in no case, agree to take on a person like her. It didn't matter, she had swallowed the bitter pill, but when she learned how matters stood at site No. 3, she decided to drag herself to the drill and help them in their work, even without pay.

This was her story, which I did not know, but which she wanted me to hear from her.

Then I conquered my cursed pride and sank down on my knees, to kiss her hands, as believers probably once kissed the hands of their saints.

She was trying not to cough as she stroked my hair. I told her that from now on, of course, we would never part.

Outside it was still raining, that disgusting, drizzling rain was falling without cease.

November 4, in the morning

When I opened my eyes, she was gone. The clothes which I had given her the night before to change into, lay carefully folded on a chair next to the bed. It was still dark, but through the wet window panes, I could see a dense whitish mist creeping down the ridge from the mountain peaks.

Does it make any difference that my diary for those days was not written? I carry the words I should have written in my soul, and that is sufficient.

But wait a little longer, just a little.... Let the Spotted One not snarl so loudly. Then they punished me, because in spite of everything I had broken the rules of discipline. There were also sums of money which had been spent without previous authorization. The percentage of copper in the ore, of copper in site No. 3, was indeed tremendous. It was worth while triumphing. Two months later I learned that Uncle Stamenko's daugther had died of advanced double bronchopneumonia in the hospital of our county town. I heard the news when I was in Dobroudja, working as a driller near Shabla. Well... let the Spotted One snarl to his heart's content. I was working as a driller there, because I was fed up with that marshal's baton in my knapsack. In fact I never carried any such baton, and I realized this when I kissed those hands, cracked with the mud and the cold, with the wheel of the drill and with its handles. Her hands were moist and burning.

What does the Spotted One want? Was my kudu not enough to satiate his hunger? Or perhaps he thinks that I haven't got the strength to press the trigger of my gun?

I realized that about the marshal's baton when I kissed those hands. It was those hands that were carrying it, and it was theirs, although they were cracked with cold and rubbed sore by the iron of the drill handles.

Lilian's hands are surely rubbed sore like them.

A forest, a boundless forest of hands is in front of me, and I wonder why Lilian and Magdalena have so many, infinitely many hands.

Spotted One.... Just have it anyway you like! Do you want to pay for my kudu? Why, fool, I am the man who killed the maned king of beasts. So how can you imagine that I'll ever be afraid of you? Wait, wait, in this forest of hands you look like a miserable prairie dog, and I'll teach you a lesson!

I press the butt of my gun against my shoulder. How close and familiar I find its cold iron!

I pull the trigger. And the night, the divine Niger, and the hushed jungle and my unhappy kudu and the Spotted One, all — the whole world — turn into one brilliant, sparkling spot.

A copy of the French original

Kai, State Hospital

... In the afternoon of June 7, Louis Philippe, the Elder of the village of Mwaba and an inhabitant of the same village brought Emilian Stavrev Kirov to the hospital in a cart. Emilian Stavrev Kirov is an engineer and geologist, of Bulgarian nationality and has been on an assignment to Mali. He was brought to the hospital in a state of absolute unconsciousness due to heart failure.

Prompt measures were taken to restore the functioning of the heart muscle.

Between June 7 and 14 the patient fell at times into a state of coma.

On June 14 in the presence of some of his colleagues and of representatives from the Ministry of State, the patient passed away as the result of the complete paralysis of his heart.

The patient left a will, in which he asked to be buried in the valley of the Niger, near the village of Mwaba.

The authorities fulfilled the said will.

Kai, June 15, 19 o'clock

(sgd) (illegible) *Managing doctor:*

ANDREI GOULYASHKI

SEVEN DAYS OF OUR LIFE

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Format: 84/108/32. 15.50 Printer's Sheets. 3,100 Copies.
Foreign Languages Press, Sofia, 1, Levski St.
The *Dimiter Blagoev* Printing Works
People's Republic of Bulgaria

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